

The Paper Knight and The Killing Tree by Thrashing-Light

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Summary: All the trinkets and tracks led into the Killing Tree. Well, trailed into the gate. Steve's whole body was about to shut down because the two least likely people to even be together in the same room, were trapped together in the Upside-Down: Erica Sinclair and Billy Hargrove. And it was all his fault. A story of unexpected friendships and expected hardships. Eventual Harringrove.

1. A Head Start

The Paper Knight and The Killing Tree

Chapter One: A Head Start

Steve's shaking grip waggled the bat like he might actually swing it.

He wouldn't swing it though because *per usual* Steve 'Paper Knight' Harrington was too little, too late.

Panic tightened his throat and for once it wasn't because of some stupid, vivid nightmare, or a caffeine overdose in combination with sleep deprivation. The copper taste of adrenaline lined the floor of his mouth as he blew out the last, pathetic wisp of cheap cigarette smoke.

It was barely past dawn on a Monday, and the Upside-Down was back.

Hopper's police issued flashlight had landed on the oozing, breathing (god did the Upside-Down actually *breathe*?!) gate in the center of the old Killing Tree. Yeah, *Killing* Tree. Back in the day at least like one in five people were in the KKK in Indiana, and Hawkins was no exception. They even had a dedicated tree for it. Sick shit.

So Steve supposed it somewhat ironic (but he knew that wasn't the right word, but he knew Nancy would know the right one for this) that the gate opened in *this* tree. Oh and ironic for the chewed open man (well now body) not even six feet in front of him.

Neil Hargrove's half devoured body lay in twisted, beaten angles in front of the Killing Tree. Steve didn't know if he was more infuriated that it wasn't himself who killed Neil, or terrified because the Upside-Down was back. His body buzzed in jumble of nerves and adrenaline.

That bastard Neil lay presented front of the shrinking, slurping gate like a goddamn welcome mat.

Next to what was left of Mr. Hargrove, spooled two crudely made, nooses. Jesus, is it screwed up I know they're badly made?The sight

of them still dragged a knife of ice up his spine.

If it wasn't for the gate... maybe he would have seen *him* up there with *her* just like in his history textbook. Was it fucked up the gate saved and doomed them both at the *same time*?

Steve just barely managed to fight another wave of nausea at the thought of *him* dead and hanging. He was too...alive for that. He stamped out his cigarette into the damp dirt. Not damp like regular mud, but dirt wet from Neil's pooled blood and monster goop.

Next to his freshly dead body, along with the half-assed nooses, were flung two bloody, cardboard signs strung with yellow knitting yarn. The yarn had to be Susan's because she was in his mother's knitting club. His mother never actually knit, she had their made do it, but that was besides the point.

One of the signs read "Faggot"

One had scrawled across it "Nigger" and below it, almost as if added on later, was "Bitch".

Steve threw up sour, half digested pizza. He knew Hop wouldn't make fun of him for it, because it wasn't the metallic smell of blood and the stink of shit that caused it. He didn't ralph pepperoni because of that utter *piece of shit* Neil's corpse and his milky, slack-jawed stare. He threw up because of the two the nooses and signs were meant for.

There had been a real struggle here. Dead leaves and dirt had been kicked up or...dragged around everywhere.

No. Not again.

Steve came out here prepared to butcher Neil Hargrove. He was really NOT prepared for this.

A dirty pink scrunchie. A scrap of blue denim. Beads from a girl's friendship bracelet. A silver pendant that had always bounced over his bare chest when he ran.

All the trinkets and tracks led into the Killing Tree. Well, into the

gate.

Steve's whole body was about to *shut down* because the two least likely people to ever be in the same room together, were fucking trapped in the Upside-Down:

Erica Sinclair and Billy Hargrove.

And it was all his fault.

Hopper rushed haphazardly to the closing gate. Steve, stuck frozen, didn't move an inch. He knew Hop wouldn't make it in time.

Steve's gaze was just locked on the blood sodden sign that read "Faggot". His grip on his bat tightened as the gate shrunk, puckered, and closed like a rancid kiss. Steve heard Hopper's hoarse voice spew out a string of crude curses into the quiet morning sky. He could tell Hopper wished that El was here to make the gate open up again.

They didn't bring El because it was just Neil's Chevy pickup truck that Steve had spotted and walkied in on the side of the road in the middle of cow country. No reason to think the Upside-Down was back, they didn't hear a Demodog or a see a black tree.

Though, Steve was actually impressed the walkie had the range it did.

"He's been dead at least six hours. At least. Goddamn it." Hopper had boomeranged back from his meltdown and was inspecting Neil's corpse again.

With a bowed head, Steve knew he couldn't meet Hopper's eyes, yet. He had let this happen. He should have listened. He had told himself it wasn't karma or whatever that stupid life philosophy was called. What goes around comes around? *Bullshit*. Life *wasn't* fair.

He refused to let his lungs freeze and seize here, though. He willed the tears back into his ducts. He had no right to break down when it was his responsibility to be strong.

"Kid. Steve. If it opened here it will open again somewhere else. We can get her back. Them. Them back. We did it before, and we can do

it again." Hopper's gravelly voice failed to ground him like it typically would. It didn't calm him because even Hopper noticed his slip up and recovered a heartbeat too late.

Her. Yeah. Sounded about right.

Out of the two people who were missing (well, now revealed to be stuck in the Upside-Down) the only person everyone in Hawkins was really worried about was Erica Sinclair. Which made sense. Obviously. Duh *Harrington*, fucking *duh*. Erica Sinclair was ten years old. She was taken from her *front yard* skipping damn rope on the sidewalk by a racist child abuser. She was Lucas' little sister for crying out loud!

She was the poster child of 'victim'. His stomach bottomed out into a crater. He wanted to smash something to bits, but he had to keep his cool.

Billy had warned him, but just didn't get it in time. Too little, too late Paper Knight.

"There is monster goo all over. They put up a fight. And we know Billy is a hell of a scrapper... We gotta move, now *Harrington*, *now*." Hop shoved Steve a little, but Steve had planted his feet.

'Plant your feet, Harrington' He heard Billy's voice in his head echoing around. He couldn't be dead. He'd kill him if he was.

"Yeah, I get it...and Hopper; I'm in. No bullshit." Steve took a deep breath and finally met Hopper's tired face.

"Thought you'd say that. Buck up buttercup, I have to call this in, then we have to go talk to Vivian Sinclair and Susan Hargrove. If Susan is back from Indianapolis by now, that is." Hopper grimaced, finally slapping his back and moving past him back to his Police Blazer.

Steve, however, wouldn't admit to anyone his secret. Well, he *couldn't* admit it to anyone! Why would he if it didn't even make any sense to him!

He wanted Billy Hargrove back just as much Erica. *Maybe* even a

little bit more. He bent down and picked up Billy's silver pendant and pocketed it. *Screw* evidence.

God he was so *fucked up*.

Two days earlier. Friday night.

Steve, against basic common sense, accepted what was most likely a pity invite to a quarry gathering. It was Friday, sleep usually evaded him, and fuck it. It might be nice to get some distance, physically and mentally, from Nance and Jonathan. It was probably also their date night. So yeah, that definitely was a reason why he opted for a quarry bash with people who he couldn't really *connect* with anymore.

It was all bullshit anyway right? He was bullshit, so let's just heap it all together. Fucking party! At least his hair looked fantastic. He smelled fantastic. He could fake *feeling* fantastic.

Steve had mingled with some girls who he knew he probably wouldn't sleep with (but whatever at least it was interaction right?), and shotgunned a few beers just to show he still could. As people trickled out, and the absolute frigid cold trickled into his veins, he lingered at the quarry anyway. He just pulled his expensive green coat in closer.

It had to be real late. Like....well past four am late. But who cared, right? It's not his parents were in town. Sarasota. Two weeks. It's not like he had anywhere to be tomorrow until he had to pick up Dustin at two in afternoon for the arcade. Babysitting. Woo. God, he was such a fucking *joke*. Such fucking bullshit. Nance, per usual, had deadly aim. Bullseye.

Steve took another deep, greedy swing from his cheap tallboy when he heard a rumble of an all-too familiar engine.

Big V8. Throaty. Gotta be Hargrove's Camaro. *Fuck*. Despite popular opinion of Steve's intelligence, he sorta knew a little bit about cars. He had to. His stupid e23, which his father *insisted* he'd drive for *appearances*, always had the weirdest fucking stuff go wrong with it.

He took to tinkering around with it to save him a trip to the mechanic every couple weeks.

He also would just know the sound of Hargrove's Camaro from anywhere, especially tonight since he was conspicuously absent from the over-hyped quarry bash.

Even fucking Tommy asked him where Hargrove was. Like he was fucking friends with Hargrove. Or his secretary. Or whatever.

"He's always like, up in your business, Harrington. Don't get your balls in a twist, it was just a question." Tommy rolled his eyes and Carol giggled. Tommy wasn't wrong, but he was just being a pain in the ass.

God, why did Hargrove have to show up now when Steve knew he was just a shade too drunk to drive home? It had been two months since that maniac that radiated spitfire and mayhem made a tie-dye shirt of his face.

Two months of Hargrove's wild blue eyes harpooning him at every corner, but never reeling him in for any *real* conversation.

"Get lost, Harrington." Hallway, three and a half weeks ago. (Oh if he only knew)

"You play like dog shit, Harrington." Basketball practice, same team, three weeks ago. (At least he didn't play like Demodog shit. Ha)

"You'll never get over Princess Wheeler with an attitude like that, King Steve." Trigonometry, two and a half weeks ago. (He barely had enough energy to pretend to be awake, much less an attitude)

"Plant your feet, Harrington." Basketball, opposing teams, one week and two days ago. (Oh, like this hadn't gotten old)

"If you're going to keep looking at my dick, might as well blow it, King Steve." Locker room, this past Monday. (He, for the record, was not trying to look at his dick. Hargrove just...commanded attention everywhere, including the shower.)

Keep away from me, your majesty, or I'll really re-work that pretty face of yours." Yesterday, lunchroom, he bumped into him on accident. (Pretty?!)

Hargrove had actually been keeping his distance, to which Steve was eternally grateful because he had way more important shit on his mind. Sure, he'd hear the roaring of the z28 Camaro that would remind him of *that* night. He'd also sneak glimpses of his curling, blond hair and the cherry of his cigarette when he'd pick up a fiery Max from the Byers', but Hargrove never engaged him. He just watched him. He gauged him from afar, like a vigilant vulture circling for the right time to claim the dead carcass he really was.

Steve had a creaking feeling deep in his lungs that he was just as rotten as those black trees were all those months ago. He just kept trying to keep it at bay knowing he was the best line of defense those kids had against the Demodogs if El wasn't there in time.

He had to keep his head in the game, even if he couldn't usually sleep well. Hell, when he did he either had nightmares or sleepwalked to the pool, sitting the same pool chair he shotgunned that beer to impress Nance eons ago.

The Camaro, blaring Motley Crue, skidded on gravel with a short scratch. The driver's side door flung open before the ignition was fully killed.

"Harrington." Hargrove launched out of the Camaro like a man on a mission.

Damnit.

Steve sighed through his nose and put his beer down on the gravel next to his car, willing himself to find that itch, that ember in his blood for a fight.

"What could you *possibly* want now, Hargrove?" Steve was proud of himself that he sounded righteously pissed and indignant. The tone Hargrove's voice sounded like he *expected* something out of Steve, and Steve was far from a *giving* mood. The headlights of the Camaro had silhouetted Hargrove when he approached. But now, with the near full moon and Steve squinting in anger, he could see Hargrove's face was a muddle of purple, red, and rage.

"Jesus man, what happene—"

"Cut the fake concern and tell me the fucking truth for once, you soft, pretty preppy shit!" Hargrove closed the gap with long strides of his legs, but even Steve could tell his natural cadence was touch off. A limp maybe? Or a rolled ankle? Who had Hargrove even fought when everyone was here at the bash? Did he like, skip down to deck some outsiders? It looked like he lost the fight anyway. Karma...that was something he—

Hargrove grabbed Steve, clenched his polo collar roughly, and slammed him into the passenger side door of his own car.

He must have been really drunk to not see that coming. Good job Steve, way to read your opponent.

"Fuck. Off! You're demanding shit of *me*?!" Steve countered by punching a sloppy right hook to Hargrove's ribs under his harsh hold. To his infinite surprise, Hargrove let go and buckled like a twig, coughing and wheezing. It was like Hargrove didn't even think it would hurt *that* bad. Steve, sober enough to know that his punch alone couldn't hurt him that bad, knew that Hargrove finally picked a fight that he couldn't win. Hargrove took a step back, and when the moonlight caught his hands Steve noticed that his hands and knuckles were fine, like...basketball game good.

Had Hargrove not fought back against this guy? Maybe he was jumped. Again that karma thing that Mrs. Willow went over once in English class, what goes around comes around.

Hargrove darkly chuckled, wheezed, then chuckled again.

"You. Owe. Me. Harrington." Hargrove finally straightened up, swaying like he was weathering a wind storm. He said *what* now? In what fucking universe did he *owe* Hargrove? His wide open shirt, and the inkblot of bruises there distracted Steve, but not too much.

"You're delusional. Who beat whose face to a pulp? You're so fucking gone." Steve got hot, that ember he had failed to find earlier just got kindled. How dare this *fuck-up* try to tell him what he owed and who he owed it to?

"You LIED to me. You!" Hargrove reared up like a stallion, nostrils

flared. His curly blond hair even matted with dark blood, caught the pale moonlight. "You said Max wasn't there, but she was. With Sinclair! You were all doing FUCK ALL in that freak's house with the paper veve drawings. I don't know what sort of wannabe Bayou voodoo rituals you geeks were doing, especially with that mutant sacrifice in the freezer, but I need answers! I swear to God, Amigo I will BEAT them out of you if I have to." Hargrove got into Steve's space again and jerked back his fist and connected with Steve's ribs. Steve didn't try block the punch because what Hargrove said surprised him. This time Steve hinged forward, only for Billy to catch him in mid-flare of pain. Hargrove then threw him again against the passenger side of his e23. Mutant. Freezer. The Demodog....did Hargrove....?

Hargrove must have seen the realization flit across Steve's pained face because Hargrove's smirk lit up like a shark that caught the smell of blood.

From this close distance he could see his full bottom lip had been busted open. Steve could smell his breath. No alcohol. Hargrove was actually sober.

"Yeah Harrington. I saw that radioactive mutant dog...flower thing in the freezer when I went for ice. I read about that fucking lab and the chemicals that killed that one broad at our school, Brandy or something. You guys had a fucking Three-Mile-Island experimental mutated creature in that Freak's house! But you know what?...Oh fucking *god* do you know what? I don't even care about what Jonathan Byers gets his rocks off to in his cult shack of a house. I don't care if you slum it with them! I don't care you if pine like a little *bitch* over the slut you lost to the freak she is fucking now." Hargrove like a slow moving, but brakeless freight train, kept gaining momentum. Steve just dug his fingers into the tendons in Hargrove's wrists and twisted his face into a snarl to mask his astonishment.

One, he had no idea Hargrove had found the frozen Demodog. When they came back to the Byers' Hargrove was gone and everything was as they left it. Demodog-sicle included.

Two, he had no idea Hargrove would actually reason out what a Demodog was (well what it could be), and just...not say anything

about it for so long. Steve knew Hargrove was smart, smarter than he was, but not this....thorough or *reserved*.

"Don't call Nancy that." Steve finally seethed and Hargrove laughed like it was the funniest joke he'd ever heard.

"Is that really all you got to say? This is King Steve?! *Fine*." Hargrove's eyes flashed and drilled his intense blue gaze into Steve. He pushed away from Steve a little, as if to get air. Billy clicked his tongue.

"Maybe I went a little crazy, a bit...manic. *Keyed up*. Maybe I shouldn't have beaten you *that* bad, but whatever. It's done and you're still *pretty* so I can't care but so fucking much. What I do care about is what my shithead of a stepsister has gotten herself into with Sinclair and those radioactive creatures. That. Impacts. Me. *Directly*. King Steve." Hargrove punctuated each word like there was something Steve was supposed to read in between the lines. Hargrove wound up his left fist back like he was about to deck Steve again. His ice blue eyes, jagged with rage, zeroed in on what Steve projected to be his cheekbone.

But Hargrove's anger didn't hold a match to the sudden fury as Steve had roiling inside him. Steve had a little height on Hargrove, which meant he had a little bit of a reach. Steve quickly swiped again at the same spot that had broken Hargrove before. Hargrove though, knowing his weakness, protected it and only received a glancing blow from Steve's punch. It still earned Steve the reward of Hargrove backing off, nursing his side instead of following through with the left hook.

"Jesus Hargrove then *what*?! What are you getting at? What do you *want*?!" Steve's voice echoed a bit through the quarry which satisfied him. He may be bullshit, but he wasn't a pushover.

Hargrove stood, looking around and...gathered himself? Did Hargrove even have a *point* to this?

"I need to know where Sinclair is going to be this weekend." Hargrove's eyes, an almost impossible blue, carved into his. He wanted what?

"Let me get this straight. You want to know where the kid, child, who you almost beat bloody for being black, is going to be for the next few days? You racist—" Steve was cut off by an almost shriek from Hargrove. It sounded like a something like a horror movie. It was all frenzied, and a hair desperate.

"*I'm not the racist!*" Hargrove tongued his bottom lip out and Steve swore Hargrove's voice cracked a little. He had his hands on his hips like he didn't know what else to do with them. The entire time Hargrove kept his hard eyes locked on Steve's, pinning him.

Steve paused. He didn't know exactly where the conversation was going from here, but if Hargrove was implying he, *Steve*, was the racist in this whole scenario, he was whacked out of his *goddamn* mind.

"Sure. Yeah, tell that to the black kid you, whose name is Lucas by the way, want Max to stay away from so bad. Fuck off, Hargrove." Steve shoved his hand into his coat pocket for his car keys. He was alert enough now that he could probably drive ten times the distance back to his house and not slip up at all. Steve could enter his car from the passenger side door and just slide over the stick and get the fuck out of here. He turned quickly to face the passenger side door to do just that.

"Wait." Billy sounded almost a hair....quiet? "Harrington, wait." Now that. *That*. Wasn't a demand.

Steve, against his better nature, paused. He turned around to see Hargrove lick his lips and stare out across the quarry. God he looked rough. The moonlight had shown now just how wrecked his left cheek was. Billy turned and for a minute Steve was taken aback at just how...human Billy looked. Billy was always a force to be reckoned with. Nothing could knock this guy off his keel. Nothing could make him kneel. He always carried himself taller than he actually was, larger than his muscles really flexed, and harder than his skin actually was....

But, now he just...looked beaten. Who...who did this to him? How badly did he *fuck up* to get himself to be this *messed up*? Steve didn't know if he should be smug or disturbed by it.

And since when did Hargrove even *talk* this much?

"Harrington, just listen to me. Max...no. Just tell me, Sinclair. I know...I know tomorrow Sinclair will be at that damn arcade, but Sunday. Where will he be Sunday?" Hargrove never said please, and as far as Steve could tell didn't make a practice of saying sorry either. In fact, earlier, that was probably the most of an apology he would ever get from Hargrove from going as unhinged as a screen door in a tornado at him in Jonathan's living room. Hargrove arched his leg back kicked up a piece of gravel and it hit the windshield of his e23 with a crack. Steve knew Billy probably didn't mean to do it (because it was actually impressive he could kick something up that high) but it just was the final straw. He'd probably have to replace the whole damn windshield.

"Harr—"

"Shut up. Even if I knew, I sure as hell wouldn't tell you. Go die in a fire, Hargrove, and leave Max, Lucas, and the rest of us alone. That's my last warning." Steve surprised himself with how stony his voice sounded. How callous and grey he could be when he wanted to be. He had faced greater horrors than Hargrove could ever be, and he was not about to let any more monsters, including the cowed one in front of him, mess with him or his. He also knew he still had the bat with the nails in the backseat of his car under an old blanket in case Hargrove got testy again.

Steve, this time with absolute confidence in his stride, made his way around the front of his car to the drivers' side, keys ready to jam it in the lock.

He heard a soft, muffled sigh, then the snick of a lighter. Had Billy just...*given up*?

"Yeah...might just happen that way. You know Harrington, you're a shitty listener. Maybe that's why Wheeler left you for that friendless, voyeur freak-show. You just don't *listen*, and maybe that's all Byer's is good for. Fuck though no one ever listens to *me* anyway, so whatever. Don't say I didn't warn you. Tell Max I warned you; I already warned her! Christ, fuck *me*, and fuck this shitty, chemical wasted, backwards town." Billy wasn't facing him anymore when he exhaled a plume of

smoke into the air. Even though the cold had finally begun to prickle Steve's skin, he didn't turn the key and open his door quite yet. The words didn't slap Steve like Billy probably intended. Nance was with Jonathan and they fit. Yeah it was weird, but Steve had already sort of owned up to being a fuck-up of a boyfriend. Steve furrowed his eyebrows anyway because....since when did Billy care if he listened to him?

Distantly, weirdly, he knew this was some sort of defining moment between them both.

"I can't do it Billy. I won't. I've faced worse than you and came up on top believe it or not. You don't scare me, and I won't let you scare Lucas." Steve noticed his slip up of calling Billy by his first name but double downed on his stern tone. Billy's head whipped around like a deer who just heard a puma nearby.

"Fear me?! *Christ*, this is exactly what I'm talking about, Steve." Billy spat his own first name back at him like a curse, but his eyes gazed flat, *lifeless*. "You don't fucking listen, you're such a fake-out, and to think for an LA second you would actually hear me out. Fuck *that*. You really want to babysit or protect those kids? Suck me. You're a Paper Knight, zhilaohu-" What was that last part? "A useless Paper Knight, and you know what? I take it back! I'm so glad I pounded your face black and blue. You're a shit in a fight, and a shit babysitter if you let kids fake voodoo sacrifices with chemical waste animals." Billy rambled high and crashed out manic. He finished by flicking his half burned cigarette onto the faceplate of Steve's BMW and just sank to the ground into a squat, chuckling lowly.

If Billy hadn't said the last part he would have gone over to Billy and seen if he was actually Ok.

But Hargrove had. And Steve was done. Steve wasn't *that* nice.

Steve got in his car, cranked the ignition, threw the shift into reverse, and peeled out evenly. He didn't listen to any music when he drove at night anymore, just in case he heard those screeches.

When he left the quarry, he swore he heard something scream. Probably Hargrove being Hargrove.

Saturday morning and afternoon came and went. It was normal, and Steve had actually managed to sleep more than four hours. Maybe he was slowly getting better, or maybe finally having that blow up at Hargrove and letting it all out of his system really was cathartic (or was that word catharsis?) Same thing. He slept better after actually confronting that jackass than he had for the past two months.

He didn't even dream or sleepwalk.

Steve, however, was purposefully seven minutes late picking up Lucas, Will, and Dustin from the arcade. He told himself it wasn't to avoid Hargrove picking up Max, but to avoid seeing Nance pick up Mike. Jonathan was off taking photos of some fields or something equally dull.

"Steve, Oh my god, Steven! You won't guess what that asshole Billy said!" Dustin floundered about in his passenger seat before buckling up.

"Dustin. Shut. Up." Lucas in the back had his arms crossed and kicked the back of Dustin's seat. Steve bit his lip. Oh, what the hell did Hargrove do now!?

"Billy said SORRY to Lucas. SORRY! Max was even surprised, and nothing surprises her! And he was all like messed up! Did you beat him up?! I knew you had it in ya." Dustin cheekily spouted out a mile a minute and a probably a half dozen emotions flashed through Steve's face, the most prominent one being confusion. Lucas kicked Dustin's seat again.

"What?! Uh, no. Dustin I didn't, and don't curse. Lucas don't kick the seats or my dad will make me take it in to get detailed again." Steve swatted at them both half-heartedly while he tried to wrack his brain to process exactly what he just heard. Hargrove apologized to Lucas, and Max didn't make him do it? Or...expect him to do it?

Was it because of what they talked about last night? He eyed the star-shaped chip in his windshield.

"Told you so Dustin. That loser probably fought a...drunk guy or something. Besides, I don't care if he said sorry. I still hate him. My

dad says he's a scumbag." Lucas grumbled from the backseat defensively. Steve didn't blame him. It wasn't like he forgave Hargrove. But still, something about this just didn't seem...to click. Why did Hargrove all of the sudden go *soft*?

"Billy is always bruised up." Will murmured from behind Steve. Huh? How did he know that? But...yeah. Come to think of it....Hargrove had been playing shirts instead of skins at basketball practice, and shiners weren't uncommon. Last night was definitely the worst he had seen him. But aside from Tommy, and maybe Jonathan, Steve didn't know of anyone else in Hawkins who could scrap with Hargrove and do that sort of damage. Tommy never looked roughed up (besides he and Hargrove were still sort of chummy) and If Jonathan got into it with Hargrove he would definitely know (Oh god would Nance chew his ear off about it).

Who *does* beat the shit out of Hargrove regularly?

"Cuz he fights people *Will!* He's like a Barbarian class..." and Dustin and the others swerved off topic about their Dungeons and Dragons stuff. Steve tried to get into it. Really, it could be kinda fun. He played sometimes. When he didn't Dustin would blow his stack and he'd have to make it up to him by buying him milkshakes. He even had a character, it was ironically a knight, a Paladin.

'Useless Paper Knight'

"Hey, Lucas, Hargrove didn't ask you anything, did he?" Steve cut them all off from their ramblings and the car got weirdly quiet.

"Um...not really...he didn't even tell me to stay away from Max or anything. He just said to do whatever us 'geeks' do on Sunday together. I told him to shove off because we aren't geeks and he turned into a jackass—" Lucas began.

"Lucas, not you too with the cursing, you mom especially will really lay into me." Steve snapped annoyed. He did *not* want to get on Mrs. Sinclair's bad side.

"*Fine.* He turned into a jerk and just ordered Max into the car. I didn't even really say goodbye." Lucas scowled, and Will's smile was a small

thing.

"Lover boy couldn't say goodbye..." Will led and three boys in the car burst out laughing. Lucas just yelled back.

After Steve dropped off Lucas, then Dustin, and finally Will, he had a cigarette outside with Joyce. They didn't say much but just existed together, two 'mother hens' slowly bonding. He took what he could get.

He got in his BMW and drove back to his empty house. He got a bottle of scotch he had already gotten halfway through last week and his bat. He sat by the heated, lit pool in case that thing came back. Steve could picture its grey, bony back hunched over the diving board. He imagined its blooming mouth and the rows of jagged teeth shifting and thirsting.

After he finished the bottle of Johnny Walker Gold he threw the empty bottle with the rest into the pool. An offering to Barb. Drinks she'd never get to have. He'd have plenty of time to dive down there and get the bottles before his parents got back from their trip.

He slept on the sofa, bat on the floor. He dreamt of Billy fucking Hargrove standing at the quarry with fire all around him. He was laughing and the fire was just *dancing around him*. Billy was naked, and smiling, like he set the quarry ablaze himself. His blue eyes cut through the smoke of the fire like a lighthouse.

Steve woke up with a rare hard-on and a stomach ache Sunday morning. He blamed it on the scotch, but he knew his hangovers usually hit him as headaches. He dealt with his stiffy unenthusiastically and showered and did his hair.

An itching in the back of his throat, a tingle in the base of his spine, he just had a bad feeling about today.

He reached for the phone to call Nancy but... What was he going to say?

'..pine like a little bitch over the slut you lost to the freak she is fucking now.'

"Damnit." Steve was getting just a *little* sick of how Billy wormed his way into his head.

His phone rang and Steve jumped out of his skin.

"Harrington residence, Steve speaking." Steve recited, memorized.

"It's just me Steve. You gotta come to Will's today, we got a new campaign and we need a Paladin to.... Ow. No, you shut up! Steve is cool! Come by Ste... shut up Mike. Gosh! STEVE!" Dustin was clearly trying to defend his honor, and Steve couldn't help but smile.

"Yeah, sure. I'll swing by." Steve sighed into the phone, wincing a little because he didn't know if he wanted to see Nancy and Jonathan today for whatever reason. He was tired or something.

"Yes! Score! And don't worry Nancy made Jonathan take her to like a... boring old person thing. Something with artsy movies. He's whipped." Dustin read Steve's mind and he wondered if something in his voice gave him away.

They said their goodbyes and after a cup of coffee Steve was out the door, bat looping in his hand idly.

He was cruising, listening to Springsteen when he caught a shock of red hair over a cresting hill. Max. She turned her head, and he knew she recognized him. He slowed down beside her when he caught up to her on her skateboard.

"Wanna lift? I don't usually pick up hitchhikers, but you seem cool enough." Steve offered and even though he knew they weren't related by blood, her eyes reminded him of Billy. Max stopped skating and Steve stopped driving. She wordlessly got into the car, board clutched in her hands.

"Cooler than you." She finally quipped back, a half-minute too late.

"Something happen?" Steve pried a little. Why wasn't Billy driving her? Why did he care?

"Leave it, Steve." Max, tight lipped as ever, just stared out the window, pointedly ignoring him.

Great. Hargrove probably went off on some bender or whatever he did in his spare time.

"Buckle up. I mean it." And for once Max didn't fight him on it. He didn't drive Max much, but when he did she always pitched a fucking fit about the seatbelt.

They rolled up to the Byers' around 10 am and predictably the Pinto and LTD were long gone. He was the man of the house. Their guardian, just like *that* night, only with Will this time.

Max bailed out of the car before Steve turned it off, but bent down to the window. She hesitated, looking at the front door.

"Did you talk to Billy?" Max asked. It caught him off guard. They never talked about him, especially with *her* bringing *him* up.

"Had the distinct pleasure of doing so Friday night." Steve answered wryly and Max's face twisted in confusion and she muttered something under her breath. It sounded like '*Can't be right*'.

She didn't say anything else as the all the little shits rushed out the front door. Max was acting weird and it wasn't helping that he already had an uneasy feeling about today this morning.

He shelved it for later, hopefully for good as Dustin ran up to him, all bounces and exuberance.

If there was an Olympic gold medal for babysitting Steve would have won it. He survived their dungeon campaign and for better or worse was actually sorta getting the hang of it. His Paladin didn't die, or get like hexed even once. And even though he didn't kill the Changling Wraith, he did distract it so Max's character could banish it. He even found himself smiling that he could help since Lucas' character had been polypmorphed, and the others had been silenced by a wizard or...something. He was still learning.

It was a little after eight, an hour before he'd do Max and the rest a favor and drop them all off, when the phone rang. He was closest to it and rose from Dustin's explanation of how cool He-Man was.

"Byers' residence, Steve Harrington speaking." He recited. It was

probably Joyce saying she was stuck late doing inventory. He sighed inwardly. If that was the case he'd have to take Will with him to all the drop-offs. His BMW would be so crowded.

"Steven, hello, this is Vivian Sinclair." He knew her distinct voice even though he had never spoken to her over the phone. He always struck him as a no-nonsense, direct woman so the waver in her voice caught him off guard.

"Hi Mrs. Sinclair, do you need me to bring Lucas by early?" Steve asked, but the waver in her voice told Steve that was *not* why she was calling.

"Is Erica there?" The question was straight and to the point, but completely out of place. Steve reeled a bit, the itch returned to his throat along with that tingle to the base of his spine from earlier that morning.

Erica never joined them. She mocked Lucas and the rest of them relentlessly for being nerds. Steve thought it was secretly hilarious.

"No, Mrs. Sinclair, I can ask Luc—" Mrs. Sinclair cut him off.

"No. Don't do that. That girl is going to get a *whooping*...just bring Lucas by at quarter past nine like usual. If I'm out, my husband, Howard, will be home. Thank you, Steven. Bye." Mrs. Sinclair signed off, sounding exasperated. She didn't even give him the courtesy of saying bye.

The kids were still watching He-Man on TV, uninterested in the call. Steve carded his hands through his hair. If Mrs. Sinclair called the Byers, she probably tried everyone else who Erica would actually play with. Something was wrong. It was weirdly the same feeling he got when he saw the lights flicker in this house when Nancy pulled a fucking gun on him. But the gate was closed. *Closed*.

It wasn't even twenty minutes later when the phone rang again.

"Byers' residence, Steve Harrington speaking." Steve repeated thickly. This second call got Will's attention and he pattered almost silently up next to him, eyes big.

"Kid. It's Hopper." *Shit*. "Is Joyce home?" Steve tried to read Hopper's voice but it wasn't a skill he was particularly good at.

"No, just me, Will, and the kids. Jonathan's off somewhere with Nancy at an artsy film thing." Steve led with a lot of information to see if any of it would make Hopper spill.

"Max is there?" It was a statement that held the hope of a question.

"Yeah. Yeah she's here I picked her up when she was skating..." Will was a shadow to his right and Steve really wanted to ask him what was going on but didn't know how without tipping off Will that something was up. Maybe he already smelled trouble. Ever since the Mind-Flayer Steve swore he had a sixth sense like Eleven did.

Even though it went against logic, he had a bad feeling about Billy. Did Billy finally go off the rails?

"Good, OK. Stay there. I'll be there in six minutes. We will talk then. See you." Not a word about Demodogs. Hopper would tell him over the phone to prepare for that, he was pretty certain.

"OK Hop, see you." Fuck. He said his name. Well it wasn't like Will wasn't going to see Hopper in a few minutes anyway.

"What did Hopper want?" Will asked in that shy way of his.

"I honestly don't know. He didn't say anything about the... you know. Upside-Down. I don't think it's that." Steve answered truthfully. By then the rest of them had filtered into the kitchen, curious and bickering.

Hopper's blazer, flashing blue and red, growled to the driveway besides his e23 in four minutes. Just how fast did he drive?

Steve walked out the door to meet him, heart pounding faster than he knew was really necessary. Hopper, pale and stilted pointed to two of the rugrats behind him. Steve turned, he pointed to Max and Lucas. Fuck. His heart rate ratcheted up again.

"Red and Lucas, Steve, with me. The rest of you, back inside. Joyce is on her way." Hopper commanded with a 'try me' edge. He didn't have

El with him, which Steve thought would calm him, but actually didn't.

"Hop is it El? Is it th—" Mike protested and Hopper's hackles were raised. Hopper usually placated or was at least more patient with Mike, but it seemed that was in short supply today.

"No. She's fine she's in the cabin. It's not that. Back inside. *Now.*" Hopper ordered and Will whispered something in Mike's ear. Mike scrunched his face up and Dustin lingered a bit before the three of them reluctantly went back in the house. Steve saw them in under two seconds press their faces to the smudged front window.

"What's going on Hop? If it's not the Upside-Down, what has you so rattled?" Steve asked, a storm brewed in his lungs. That moldy, rotten feeling that he was useless crept in him again.

"Yeah, what gives?" Lucas parroted, crossing his arms in front of him.

Hopper sighed deeply and his fingers twitched.

"Son, your little sister has gone missing. She isn't at any of her friend's houses and we've checked her playground and school. Your mother is out looking for her while your father is at home in case she comes back. Do you know where Erica likes to go? Hide? Was she acting unusual this morning?" Hopper began and Steve swallowed. Sinclair. He knew Mrs. Sinclair was downplaying him on the phone. He knew this call was her last resort.

'Where will he be Sunday?' Billy had meant Lucas. There was no way Billy would... no. Billy was an asshole and a prick with impressive anger management issues, but he wouldn't mess with a random ten year old girl. He *wouldn't*.

"Erica?! No she never talks to me about anything except barbie stuff. This morning she was being a brat like usual, she ate my bacon! Wait, Hop you don't think a Demodog. You don't think they're back or she's in the Upside-Down. She's ten and only likes girly stuff!" Lucas began to understandably *freak out* and Max grabbed his hand with hers. Did Hopper have her stay out here just to help with Lucas? If so, good call. Maybe Billy had nothing to do with this and he was

just drunk with Tommy at Tonya's.

"No, we sealed the gate Lucas. There weren't any 'electrical issues' at your house. None of your neighbors or your parents heard or saw anything out of the ordinary, and there was no blood. The only thing was her jump rope on the sidewalk." Hopper reassured, voice calm. Calmer than Steve thought he actually felt. Lucas stiffened and gestured wildly with his free hand. Steve knew though, that this couldn't be a coincidence. This was Hawkins, no crime happened here. Kidnappings didn't happen, how was Hop so reassured she wasn't in the Upside-Down?

"Erica never leaves her stuff out. She's a neat freak, and mom would take away her dolls if she left anything out she could trip over. Something's wrong. Do you have any clues?" Lucas began to huff and he looked like he wanted to ask Max to drive him somewhere. Not again.

"Well, your sister isn't the only one missing." Hopper exhaled, finally submitting to lighting a cigarette. The snick of his lighter sounded just like Billy's at the quarry, but Steve knew they smoked different brands. Hopper even rolled his own. Hopper's eyes landed on Max. She pursed her lips, like she *knew* something.

Billy.

"Max, we can't find your brother." Hopper adjusted his weight and took a long, hearty drag.

"*Step* Brother, and so? He always drives off to who-knows-where and does weird, shady stuff. He sometimes doesn't come back for days. It's his *thing* and I don't care. Ask one of his dipshit friends." Max corrected like a whip. Steve would say almost a little *too* defensively.

"*Right*. We got a noise complaint a half hour ago at your house, Max. We found Billy's Camaro still running, with the driver's side door open blasting some terrible music. There was some blood splatter on the dash and blond hair in the driver's seat." Hopper exhaled his cigarette smoke far away from Lucas and Max.

Max shifted and Lucas looked over at her.

The air in Steve's lungs froze.

There was no one in Hawkins who could pull Billy from his precious z28. After Max dented and scratched up his car, Billy had somehow scraped the money together to get the cosmetically damaged chassis fixed in the body shop a town over. He knew because his fucking e23 had to go there for some stupid expensive imported fuel pump and he saw the Camaro. Billy pampered that flashy car.

"Now, I don't know much about your *step* brother," Hopper's voice turned grave "But I can muster a guess that car is his baby and he'd never just leave it running with its door open. Everything else about the car, except the blood and hair, was immaculate, even the title was hidden under the seat, under a Marcus Kabore..don't know anything about that." Hopper raised an eyebrow at Max who stiffened up straight as an arrow.

Steve had never seen Max bolt to attention like that.

"Car's *not* Neil's, but he *makes* Billy keep it clean anyway, to teach him respect and responsibility." Max muttered, eyes locking onto Steve's. What was *that* supposed to mean? Why was she looking at *him*?

"Definitely looks like the lessons worked. Anyway, no one answered when we knocked on your front door. We flashed lights though the windows and unless he was holed up in the bathroom, no one was home. Any ideas what might have happened?" Hopper inhaled another long drag, almost charring half the whole hand rolled cigarette. Steve couldn't get a read if he thought Billy had been taken, or Billy had done the taking. Steve hoped the former. There was just *no way* Steve could believe that Billy would kidnap Erica Sinclair.

Maybe Billy owed money to someone and they found him, and Erica was just...at a movie. Steve licked his lips.

"Billy was pretty messed up Friday when I saw him. Someone worked him over that night, it was fresh." Steve found himself saying instead. He felt stupid for answering a question clearly meant for Max and drawing attention to himself. He wasn't sure when or if he was supposed to mention *the* conversation with Billy.

"I figured as much, Steve. Max, do you know where your mother and... *step* father are?" Hopper glanced knowingly towards Steve. 'Yeah Hopper, I know the guy who bashed my face in and harasses me in school pretty well unfortunately.'

"Mom's in Indianapolis visiting my Uncle Ted. She'll be back tomorrow. Neil... he was home this morning when I left, but Billy wasn't. He didn't come home last night after dropping me off." Max bit her lip. Was that why she asked me if I had talked to Billy and got confused? Did she think I saw him last night instead of Friday? Why would she ask me that this morning if Billy really *did* disappear a lot? Nothing about this was adding up at all, and Steve had a feeling that he wasn't the only one hiding something about Billy.

"Whose blood is it? What does this have to do with *my* sister?" Lucas piped up, worked up. "Did that racist *psycho* take my sister?!" Lucas lunged at Hopper pushing the solid man to no effect.

"Lucas." Max's voice sounded a hair angry as she grabbed Lucas. "Billy is an asshole, and I *hate* him, but he wouldn't do that. He *isn't* a racist and.... I don't even think he knows you have a sister."

"Then why does he only hate me? Huh?!" Lucas countered.

"He knows you like-like me!" Max shouted in Lucas' face the only way a girl saying something obvious could. "He doesn't like that I'm happy here with you, and he isn't and doesn't have anyone. 'sides he mostly had black friends back in LA. Latinos and Asian ones too. It's sort of why Neil made us... Billy might be a total shithead, but he *wouldn't* take Erica." Max responded urgently, clearly hiding key details. If Steve could pick up on it, he knew Hopper could too. All of this made his skin Steve's skin crawl.

I'm not the racist!

"That guy had *real* friends? Sure Max, when pigs fly. I thought you had my back! I guess blood is really thicker than water!" Lucas ripped his arm away from Max and her face got pink.

"We're not even related by blood, dumbshit! Lucas, why would he apologize to you, then take your sister he probably doesn't know you

have? That makes *no sense*. I told him to apologize like a month ago, and he finally did it! Stop making me defend him. I *hate* it, and it's not helping us find her!" Max yelled back at Lucas with equal ferocity. She made good points. He didn't even tell Billy to apologize, because *hell*, he never thought he would.

Billy consistently surprised him; Steve never knew what he was going to do next. It was frustrating because Billy had a good habit of knowing what other people would do...

Other people. Billy knew someone was going after Lucas, and was warning Steve to protect him or to allow *him* to do so. But who...who would want to hurt Lucas or Erica Sinclair? Who was Billy that *afraid* of to track him down and ask for his help?

Then, '*Snick*'. Like a lighter, it all clicked.

Hopper stood between Lucas and Max like a wall, saying something to try to calm them down, but all Steve heard in his head was white noise.

'I need to know where Sinclair is going to be this weekend.'

'No one ever listens to me anyway.'

'Don't say I didn't warn you. Tell Max I warned you, I already warned her!'

'Fear me? Christ this is exactly what I'm talking about, Steve, You don't fucking listen.'

'You really want to babysit or protect these kids? Suck me.'

'You're a Paper Knight, Harrington.'

'Neil makes Billy keeps it clean, to teach respect and responsibility.'

'He mostly had black friends back in LA. Latinos and Asian ones too. It's sort of why Neil made us...'

It hit Steve like a sucker punch. He really was so fucking *stupid*.

Neil Hargrove was a *child* beating, *racist*, piece of *shit*.

It added up. Neil terrified Billy, his monster. and he now was Erica's monster too. Billy sounded so urgent, and cared so much because he *knew* how much of a shitstain his father was. The real reason he picked on Lucas was probably because he knew all this would eventually happen. It was a time-bomb.

Holy fuck. If only he had listened or bothered to give a damn. Billy had wanted to trust him. Billy risked everything to trust *him*.

'to think for an LA second you would actually hear me out.' Steve fisted his hair and wanted to scream. All of it made sense. Why Billy's body and sometimes his face was always so bruised up but his knuckles *weren't*. Billy thought no one would ever believe him that his own *father* beat the *piss* out of him regularly. How long had Neil *beat* him? How much did Max really *know*? It was textbook. It didn't *excuse* anything Billy did...but the anger, the...pent up rage.

Steve got where it all came from. He'd seen the effects of awful dads before, a while back with Davie.

No, not thinking of Davie right now.

Maybe even got a sliver of an idea how Billy felt when Neil made him and the rest of his family pack up and move to the nowhere Midwest. It was so *obvious* and clear to him now he didn't see how others didn't see it.

Well, it was *Billy* after all. Steve still considered Billy barely human, he was more like an uncontrollable tornado. Who would have thought he could be the victim of anything except his own fuck-ups? Who would have thought anyone could make him this *afraid* all the time? It still didn't hit Steve it seemed possible, but it *was*.

Did he beat Max too? It didn't look like it, but he Steve couldn't tell. He'd would ask Billy when he found him.

Yeah, that's what he'd do, find Billy, and Erica.

"We are treating them as separate disappearances until we can find a link. OK?" He heard Hopper's voice boom, but it still sounded like he

was underwater. The squabbling between Max and Lucas caused all the others to run outside and now they were all clamoring around them like a pack of ankle biting dogs.

'It's Neil. It's Neil. All of it. It's him.' Steve thought to himself. He had to fix this. He had to get Billy and Erica back. Before it had been the kids' campaign, this was his to sort out. He'd prove Billy wrong, and *bash* Neil's skull in.

The itch, the ember of a fight broke out in Steve like an inferno. He squared up against Demigorgons and Demodogs, and Neil had *nothing* on them. He was going to *rip* his life *apart*. He was going to *murder* Neil Hargrove, and he hoped Erica wouldn't have to watch. Steve needed a distraction though, because Dustin was tugging on his arm, pleading for an explanation he couldn't give.

If he told Hopper what he knew, he would make him stay behind and that just wasn't an *option*.

It was about that time the green Pinto squealed down the road. Joyce needed to tighten the serpentine belt, but he couldn't be more happy to hear that high whine. He could *kiss* Joyce Byers for having the perfect timing for a distraction. Joyce pulled up beside his e23 and got out, frantic and her eyes swarmed the children like bees to count them.

"Hopper what is it? Is it back? *Is it?*" Joyce swooped up to him and the black plastic box in Will's hand caught Steve's eye. The walkie!

Steve shrugged Dustin off and snagged the walkie talkie from a distracted Will.

"Hey! Steve!" He heard Dustin protest, but he had already held the BMW's driver's door handle in his hand, twisting the key in the lock. His hands didn't tremble, that mold in his lungs had vaporized, the bat was in his backseat. He was *ready*.

"Kid you can't just—" He heard Hopper and juttled his clenched jaw up. Hopper would figure it all out soon enough, Steve just needed a head start.

"*Try me*. When I find them, I'll call it in." Steve didn't even recognize the sound of his own voice, it sounded *that* sure. He hadn't been this *sure* about anything in a long, long time and it felt fucking *terrific*. Hopper raised a finger, but by that time Steve had already ducked inside his car and slammed the door. He cranked the ignition and doing his best impression of Billy Hargrove he could, he peeled out of the driveway leaving a smoking, stinking burnout.

Time for the Steve 'Paper knight' Harrington to slay a monster, and *prove* himself.

Well, this ship struck me by surprise and this story came to me like a lightning bolt. Please let me know if you like it. this is going to be my first work in this fandom :)

Next chapter is Billy's POV. They will switch.

2. A Crash Landing

The Paper Knight and the Killing Tree

Chapter Two: A Crash Landing

Billy thanked his one lucky star this little bitch wasn't crying.

He didn't *do* comfort, especially with little girls he didn't fucking *know*. And if she were to whine, and cry, she'd attract more of those mutants and they'd up and *truly* fucked. Billy's nostrils flared looking down at the little Sinclair, he didn't know there were *two* of them. If he had he would have played things a *little* differently.

Well, apparently a whole helluva lot differently because where the absolute *fuck* were they now? Billy tongued his lower lip out, and shifted his weight to his better leg. His left ankle would be a hundred percent if he could rest it for a few hours.

The chill here sunk into his bones differently than Hawkins usually did. This chill kept him alert, on a razor's edge that focused him.

Billy attentively turned in a full circle, scanning the dim, stagnant forest in front of him. Everything reeked like damp mold, decay, and marsh muck. A regular nuclear meltdown 'Alice in Wonderland'. '*Don't stop here this is Bat Country*'.

Stephen King would *cream* his khakis for inspiration like this.

Billy strained his neck, but didn't hear anything other than the girl in front of him rustling leaves with her gooped-up keds. He squinted into the distance, but didn't see anything lurking behind any bushes or trees.

He'd totally had been through worse.

Billy thought of that one time he had his face completely *dismantled* by those Crips outside that run-down liquor store that never had Antoine's brand of whiskey in stock. But back then he had his crew. He had his *family*. He wasn't *alone*.

He'd give his left *nut* to even have *one* of them here.

Javier would be the most useful. He stood 6' fucking 2" and was built like a Cadillac. He also had a spooky sixth sense for when danger was about to go down. His Colombian madre drilled all sorts superstitious tales into him *real* young. They both claimed if they saw dark butterflies it meant someone close to them died (They swore them before Antoine and his Maman). They also both believed 'El hombre caiman' (a damned alligator-man), and 'La Tundra' (one ugly moss-covered vampire bitch), and others crept through the Colombian jungle as sinister monsters.

Billy thought they were just ghost stories Javier, or Sang Hoon's auntie told him when he still wore velcro shoes, but after this, it held water.

Damn, he was going to fuck this whole thing up and get eaten. It was established *fact* Billy was just too damn *reckless*. Mei would know what to do; she was the dictionary definition of paranoid.

Though that prickly priss would just be bitching in mandarin over how the muck would never wash off her knock-off snakeskin pumps 'Wo de gaogenxie shi zang! Wo de gaogenxie shi zang!' (my heels are filthy! my heels are filthy!). Billy smirked, then frowned when a fresh shank of dread scraped across his ribs.

No, he wouldn't wish this place on *any* of his old crew.

It pissed Billy off that after his beat-down Friday night he kept thinking of his old family back in LA. He had done a damn good job pushing them out of his mind until now. His cutesy jaunt through memory lane wasn't going help him, or this little bitch.

The kid coughed on the air.

Merde(shit) the chemicals must be airborne. This place set him on edge more than any alley in South Central. He still couldn't even hear *anything*, not that Hawkins was especially loud to begin with....

Was this *Hell*?

Did Neil *finally* kill him just like he always *implied* he would after

Maxine got old enough?

He glanced down at the girl with the filthy pink dress who was just itching her bloody scalp. That mutant did rip out a softball sized poof of her hair.

WAIT. If this was hell, why the FUCK would this girl be there with him?! And why was it *cold*?!

And why wasn't *Neil* here?

Despite still being woozy from chloroform Neil used on him when he pulled up to the house (of course Neil would swipe some from his shit refrigeration factory job), he saw and *heard* that mutant rip his throat out.

Also, all those other gang-bangers and whoever the fuck else they helped put down in LA haven't shown their ugly mugs. Those pissdrinkers would definitely be itching for some payback after what he and his crew did to them. Especially what Antoine did to that one guy with the Old Crow bottle. That was a particularly hard-ass scrap Antoine won.

So yeah, definitely NOT Hell.

Billy never was about any sort of religion anyway. A lot of fucking good it did to have faith that someone or some God would save them. Guard them. When you died, you were *dead*. Praying didn't save his Maman (mom), and it certainly didn't do any favors for his Pépère et Mémère. No matter how many Kinara or advent candles his Maman lit, God never blessed their home.

Oh.

That was just fucking *it*.

That mutant flowerdog had to have dragged the little bitch into the tree-tunnel to lure him its *territory*.

It explained why she was almost completely unscathed from the attack, the Mutant only had her by her fucking hair! When he dove through that big fucking tree tunnel to get the brat back (which

obviously ended in spectacular failure, fuck up number *infinity*), they must have ended up in the hidden toxic waste dump where these things *lived*.

He thanked his lucky stars he met Bayani, and took all those countless years training to properly knife fight so he could carve it up.

'You always get cut. Control where you get cut.' Bayani cut him across the outside of his arm. *Son of a bitch!* *'Get your ugat (artery) cut.'* Bayani gestured to the inside of his arm. Bayani spoke more to him in the past ten minutes than he did in one day. *'Dead in siyam mintuos (nine minutes).'* Apparently Baya learned Kali from his dad who had served in the Filipino Armed forces. Bayani once told him while training he never talked much because he heard too many voices in his head.

Rule number one about knife fights still held true: that fucking mutant carved out skin and meat out of his right temple with one of his claws. It *stung*, bled like a *sieve*, and it'd definitely scar, but it'd probably look bitchin'. His scars didn't know easy now that he wasn't in the sun anymore, but that cut was certainly would do the trick.

He looked down at the dead mutant that ATE Neil. It was carved open like a fucking retard kid's jack-o-lantern. He nudged it a bit. If it wasn't a fucking mutant (and didn't drag them here) he'd be hard pressed to *not* give it a collar and leash. That Doberman lover, Marcus, could probably train the damn thing. He could hear that goofy bastard now: *'rapporte'* (fetch), *'au pied'* (heel).

"Well. Are you just gonna stand there or be useful?" She had her hands on her hips, and though her face was bruised up she didn't seem to give a *damn*.

Billy's jaw dropped a bit as he cocked his head. This brassy tart had a *mouth* on her, but he far from minded it. This wasn't that fake-ass, kiss-ass, Midwest cooing that all the boring cows here sported. She had big city sass. She couldn't have possibly been born in this pasture these hicks dared call a town.

This cleared out the cluster-fuck that was his own head.

"Useful? Who do you think stabbed that mutant dog to death that tried to eat that dry bush you call a hairstyle?" Billy countered and he could not believe he was having this conversation with a...well he didn't know how old she was. He was shit at ages. He couldn't fault her completely though, like there was a hair dresser in Hawkins who could do a decent *cornrow* or *box braids*. She had to probably get it cut by that fat *Italian* fuck or her mom.

Well, not it that mattered *now*. Most of her hair was shredded off anyway due to being used as bait. If they were in LA he knew Marcus could salvage it like he did for his lil sis from time to time. He'd carve some zigzags, stars or shit into it. She'd be the sickest kid in this dumbfuck town.

"My hair? Mmmm, I have two words for yours. Nappy trainwreck. And yours didn't even get eaten by Cujo." What?! This little bitch just used a slur for her hair against him? Billy just cackled despite breathing in what had to be toxic chemicals. He lowered himself into an Asian squat to her level and glared at her. Instead of trying to unnerve her, he was trying to scrutinize her.

"You haven't watched Cujo." Billy challenged sharply, studying her face for a lie. He was pretty damn good at that shit. You had to be where Billy and his family came from.

"Have so. Donna kills it with a baseball bat. I bet Lucy Harris a pack of gum that she couldn't get her big brother Tommy to sneak us in the movies. She fell for it, joke's on her. She cried during the movie *and* gum is trashy." The little shit smiled proudly. Billy barked out another harsh laugh. True. Why chew something if you weren't gonna eat it?

Wait...

Harris? *Tommy* fucking Harris. Sinclair's little sister played *Tommy and his little sister*. Billy wondered absently if that was how a groveler like Tommy Harris ended up friends with Steve Harrington, alpha-fucking-betical desk order.

Back on track.

There was absolutely no way this *broad* was Sinclair's sister. Two black families had to set up shop in this hillbilly town.

"What's your name, Little Hickshit?" Billy asked suddenly.

"What's yours, Big Cityshit?" She echoed back. She had to be the only person in this whole fucking town who dared call him that.

"I asked first, and I dibs because I killed Cujo." Billy flashed his eyes, and jutted his chin to the festering gut-fest.

"Uh. I get dibs because your bigot dad tried to murder me. Hellooooo." She swerved her pointer finger around in the air. Sassy cunt.

He couldn't hide the wince at the truth of the statement though. Putain(fuck), like he'd apologize for Neil Hargrove's actions. He cut his gaze away and clicked his tongue.

The funny thing was, he hadn't told anyone in this weak town of Hawkins his *whole* name. Or the name he had *before* he had to move in with Neil one year, eleven months, and twenty one days ago.

"Luc William Hargrove. Billy." No *fuck that*. He was taking his *real* name back even if it only lasted a little while, and the only fucking witness was *Sinclair's* little sister.

"Luc William Loga. Still Billy." It felt satisfying to say his last name and not get be paranoid of suffering a beating for it. He stressed *Billy* because only Ant called him Luc, the rest had just called him Loga.

He wanted it to stay that way. If Little Hickshit referred him anything other than Billy, she'd be the one to suffer Maxine's *bitter* bitchiness, and who knew what *else*.

He bit out with a bloody cough. Fuck this...fluff shit. It was like breathing in fucking fiberglass. Then the little bitch's eyes went wide.

"How do you not even know your name?! Did you get hit on the head too hard cuz Loga isn't even a *real* last name." She dared to gesture at his head, knowing his mug was all busted and gross.

"It's real, just not real fucking *American*, sweetheart." He gave her his best unhinged smirk, but she just scrunched her face up in confusion.

"And Luke? Like in those space nerd movies my brother watches? The one with the big foot who makes the whiney noises?" She had incredulous look on her round face that made him want to just ditch her. Just what the fuck was he *doing* anyway? That movie came out *after* he was born for *fucks* sake.

"Yeah, well, why do you think these backwater pendejos know me as Billy? All that nerd shit does is pander to weak-willed, passive virgins who live their lives through their own escapist fantasies." It was true.

Nerds like Sinclair and the rest of the geekqueefs needed to wise-up and put in the necessary, sweat, blood, and tears to survive in the real world. It probably wouldn't happen in that order.

"Mmmmmhmmmm. I can see why my brother hates you. You're so not a nerd. You can actually *dress*, and your sports car is *cool*." That admission caused Billy to pause. This Little Hickshit knew who he was this *whole time*?!

Well, maybe 'Big Cityshit' should have given it away.

He got played.

"You gotta..." Billy balled his hands into fists. He wasn't going to lay hands on this girl. He had never sunk to *that level*, but an instinctual thrust of anger over his wounded pride sparked anyway.

'This isn't South Central. I have nothing to *prove* to her. I'm the *baddest* thing here.' He was the *King* and he would *hold*. *His. Ground*. No one here would *dare* try to claim *his* turf. Also, the only real *threat* to his existence was now half inside (or outside) Cujo.' Billy calmed himself.

Well, he'd be willing to share dominion of Hawkins if King Steve ever woke up and rose to the occasion.

"And here I thought there was no way you could actually *be* Sinclair's sister, what bulhaeng (shit luck)." Billy and Little Hickshit hacked out a wet cough at the same time.

THIS ASBESTOS RADIOACTIVE MESS. PUTA MADRE! (mother fucker)

If he didn't survive the Cujos, he'd be dead in a week according to what happened to that broad, Blair. Just *super*. (dae bag! Sang Hoon would say sarcastically).

"Bull what?" She reared her head back after her coughing fit.

He slipped up in Korean. He had been *real* careful about only speaking English in Indiana outside the occasional 'amigo'.

"Forget it. Listen, getting out of this hellhole will be a lot easier if you don't hate me over the scrap between your brother and I." He stood up, absently touching his bandaged ribs. Dieu Merci (thank God) they were mostly bruised with only one cracked. If Neil had broken his ribs he'd have never made it to Little Hickshit in time.

"I'm Erica Diana Sinclair. And I don't hate you, you're just acting stupid. Please, if someone like you," She gestured pointedly. "wanted to really hurt my brother, I think he'd at least have a bump on that big egg-shaped noggin of his or something." Billy cocked an eyebrow at her. There was no way she had come up with that. Hawkins kids weren't *that* clever. Then again this this one was *different*.

"That's at least what my momma said, and my momma is always right. My dad didn't agree at first, but then he did. He doesn't like you." She stuck out her hand for a handshake. A truce? Fuck it.

"Your mother is a smart woman." Billy managed, he didn't care about her old man. He had no doubt that whatever genes Sinclair's mother had skipped one kid entirely and ended up entirely in her. At least he was going to die with someone who wasn't a complete flat tire.

He grabbed her elbow, slid his hand down her arm and clapped her hand and gave her the pistol finger.

"I don't shake hands like I'm in a fucking bank, Little Hickshit." Billy grinned. Might as well make some fun out of what could be the last few hours of his life. Billy wasn't an optimist, whatever death forest they were in he probably wasn't going to make it. But, he'd sure as

hell die fighting and try to get this Little Hickshit out...wherever out was.

"Hmph, I bet the only time you were in a bank was to rob it." She smirked, and he smirked back. The mouth on her!

"I've cashed plenty of welfare checks at the teller. 'sides, I was the wheelman, *and* we knocked over a payday loan place, *not* a bank." Billy winked and he knew she half believed him. He wasn't going to give away if it was actually true.

"Well, I guess your mom has to be real smart too, cuz your dad was a damn fool." Billy grunted in agreement at the little girl in front of him smiling like she knew a secret. Little Hickshit seemed to really getting information out of him.

"Had." He corrected automatically. He dug around in his jacket pocket aaaannnd...FUCK YES! Maybe his luck was turning around because he found his zippo and a crumpled, half pack of cigarettes. How those didn't fall out of his jacket, but he lost his mother's necklace was just a crazy coincidence he supposed.

Well, stranger things had happened.

He scanned the forest again. He thought he saw something but maybe he was just having a vision, like Bayani since he *saw* auras and all sorts of visions. Billy squinted weirdly enough, even though he followed mutant Cujo into a wasteland, the place they were in looked similar. It was kinda like they were in the same woods, but everything just fucking *sucked*.

Luc William Loga didn't *do* the 'great outdoors' so he had no idea which cardinal direction they should go in, or how to find North. Cujo dragged the Little Hickshit around to lure him somewhere, so he couldn't see that tree where Neil had originally wanted to *lynch* them.

He flicked the lighter and lit a cigarette, the Little Hickshit had gone quiet and he looked down her. She was just staring with her big dark eyes at him.

"What."

"Nothin."

Ok... He took a long drag. Oh it felt so *good*. He only had five good ones left. He would have to save at least one for the end.

Billy's head spun, lightheaded. This radioactive dandelion fluff he was breathing in had to be fucking with him. He worked out too much and did too much cardio conditioning to be feeling this weak.

He wiped the monster goo on the hunting knife on his jeans and put it through his belt. The knife was a solid piece, eight inch fixed blade bowie. Sharpened. His old man at least had good tastes in knives.

Oh. He puffed out a smoke ring for kicks.

"Look, Little Hickshit, I'm no fucking knight in shining armor. If you wanted that, you should wish upon a star that Steve 'shining-knight' Harrington will show up on a white horse. I'm not gonna carry you if that's what you're angling for. We gotta move because whenever you kill a top dog, something else always comes 'round to take its territory." Billy spoke another truth he knew. Turf warfare was his bread and butter. He bet whatever Cujo really was, he ruled as the alpha of this neck of the woods. Another Cujo would eventually come around to fill the power void. It was the same in South Central, and it was probably the same here.

Cujo eat Cujo.

"I don't *need* any knight, Big Cityshit. I can walk by *myself*. I just went from Brownie to Girl Scout, I got my survivalist badge, and I've camped here. I *know* here. That tree Cujo dragged me though was the Killing Tree. We read about it in history class, but you aren't from around here so I guess you wouldn't know. We had a campout there once and my mom was soooooooo mad when she found out. She slapped Sarah Thompson's mom so hard her earring fell out and they never found it. The Killing Tree is this way." Erica Diana Sinclair could have just saved their miserable lives.

"After you then, Girl Scouts before the Flip-Outs." He overheard plenty what the bumpkins in Hawkins *made up* about him.

"Girl Scout before *He-man*." She corrected. She looked at him again in that way that meant that she was pointing out the obvious. Though It wasn't full of piss and spikes the way Maxine always said it. "Muscles. Sword. Half a shirt." Ok, she was really playing him then. He-Man? *Him?*

"And you say I hit *my* head hard." He huffed. He'd let her have her stupid Barbie fantasy. Besides, barbarian totally fit him more than a knight did, and this knife might as well be Greyskull the way he could wield it.

"Me? That was Lucas. He was the practice kid. They got it right with me." It just dawned on Billy that he and Sinclair almost had the same fucking first name. Napakarumi (yuck).

"That's pretty damn obvious." He muttered. Especially if Sinclair preferred to seek *Max's* company. He took another relieving drag.

They walked in silence until they reached the dark, winding Killing Tree. The hillbilly lynching tree loomed like an impossibly tall basketball hoop in a bit of a clearing. He could tell why all those bigots chose it. It had one thick branch just at dunking height. He walked around and even saw the nooses that Neil had somehow tied together.

Then Billy saw the rotting signs. He had missed them in the moonlight when he had been fighting the chloroform and saving Little Hickshit from a mutant.

'Faggot.' 'Nigger bitch'

Billy's blood froze to ice, and his heart hardened to marble.

He *knew* it.

Ta dangran zhi dao! (He *fucking* knew it)

He knew it was Neil all along. No pig on at the LAPD at the time *listened* to him or what Jerry had to say. The 77th precinct didn't care about the gays or the blacks, and certainly not the *gay blacks*. Susan didn't give two *shits*, or was in such a pit of denial... SON OF A BITCH.

It was the same size cardboard sign, same cramped handwriting. Same fucking-every-fucking-thing that hung around Antoine's neck.

He reached towards he rotted, sodden pieces of cardboard, and his hands were fucking shaking like a *little bitch*. He could barely grab one, and yank it closer.

Billy shrieked.

It was a hoarse, crazed sound that howled through the air and he didn't even recognize his own voice leaving his throat or think it could make that sound. His whole body was in the throes of an uncontrollable earthquake.

There was a part of him, a small splinter, that hoped that maybe Neil wasn't the complete shit-heel who would be that *vindictive*. That Antoine Kabore simply pissed off the *wrong* Crip or skinhead at the *wrong time*.

Billy took out the knife and brutally stabbed the sign like he had actually grown the balls to stab Neil. Over and over. Again. Encore. Otre vez. Dali. Zaici. Muli (Again).

He remembered how he'd sponge his hands down on Antoine's flat-top. He could never grow out as far as his cousin Marcus because his hair was just a bit too fine. He would run his hands down his smooth, hard abs the same color as the syrup they poured on their burnt pancakes. He treasured the quiet conversations they had in French knowing no one could understand a damn raunchy word they threw at each other. Antoine had a dick that could turn a dyke straight (which always left him sore) and shoulders that could carry all of LA. His kisses though...those could stop time on a *dime*.

He still remembered the stupid dimple he had on his right cheek (face), but not his left. Billy occasionally laughed at the birthmark on his left cheek (ass) that looked like a pineapple.

Antoine drove like Ray Charles, and cooked like him too. Antoine caught a toaster on fire with *nothing* in it, and backed into the same fire hydrant twice in a *row*. He also had the *tackiest* taste in earrings and shoes. Billy wore all jewelry and high-tops he stole for him

anyway. He'd layer those god-awful chains over his mother's pendant and pierced his ears three times for all that flash. Billy made up for it by helping him learn to read and write worth a damn, pick out a *decent* outfit, and how to dance.

Yeah, *white boy* teaching a *black one* how to dance. *Backwards* as fuck. Well, his Maman did show him more than a few moves. It was one of jobs after all. Also, he wasn't 'wonder bread' white so Antoine didn't lose *too* much cred.

Along with dancing, Billy taught him how to place kick, in return, Antoine introduced him to basketball.

'*Plantez vos pieds, Luc.*' Ant taught him everything he knew about basketball. He did it even knowing Billy would never be tall enough to amount to anything. He partnered with him with two-on-two no matter *what*. Billy wasn't stupid, Antoine could have chosen any taller black guy in the neighborhood but he always chose *him*.

Billy *toiled* for it.

He'd practice till his fingertips bled to earn every shining smile and chest bump. 'Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard'. Despite all the doubters, Billy eventually upped his game, and together he and Anthony reigned as kings of their court. And BOY did they hold court.

Until Antoine was fucking *hung* over their court.

Their basketball hoop. Their bent netless rim and sun-faded backboard. Neil killed HIS KING. He killed the person who dared to lift him up as one of the unlikely kings over their worn out, ghetto court. Antoine dangled from it like a cheap Halloween prop, the cops thought someone was simply 'making a STATEMENT'. The 77 precinct pigs was right, only it wasn't some random drug deal who did it, that random someone was NEIL, and that statement was that his family would never be safe if Billy Loga kept screwing up.

Billy's body heaved like waves in a storm surge as he kept wailing into the ground with the knife. His hair stuck against his wet cheeks, and he couldn't BREATHE.

"He really did it. I was right, the sonuva bitch. Neil killed Ant. Mon petite coeur. He killed my fucking King. He should have never...." 'chose me' wasn't said. His lungs shook like a spray paint can and his nose and throat were swollen and snotty. This HAD to be hell. He was reliving this all over again.

He was *over* Antoine, and he *knew* it. He knew it because of the way that *Steve*...

"—shit. Billy. Get up already! You're He-man, not Cry-man!" Billy jumped up to attention and immediately he stopped all motion. Little Hickshit had him by flap of his jacket. FUCK. He had stood up so fast he saw spots in his vision (when did he get on the ground?). Little Hickshit toppled over and bit it.

She was shaking. He freaked her out. FUCK.

"..."

"..."

"I know what that word means. Faggot. I heard Matthew Benson say it to Jason Smith on the playground last year. I called Lucas a faggot when he used the last of the syrup. My mom gave me a biiiiiig whooping. She told me it was a bad word like nigger, and it meant when a boy like liked only boys and that it was the way it just was." Little Hickshit explained, still sprawled out on what was probably radioactive waste.

Putting the knife away, Billy offered a hand pulled her up. His breathing had finally evened out, and he shook out his limbs, ignoring the pain lancing through his ribs. The pain actually grounded him. They still had to get out of here. He couldn't keep living in the past. LA was long ago in his Camaro's rear view mirror. He had to get her out of this *hellscape*.

Billy swallowed thickly.

"You tell anyone about this, and your barbies get a closed casket funeral. You got that Little Hickshit?" Erica Diana Sinclair made a zipper motion to her lips and threw away the key.

Billy almost snorted up his snot and wiped the rest on his denim jacket sleeve when little shit bird handed him a damn purple polka dot handkerchief.

"Thanks." They still *made* these? He made a mucus-mess of it.

"Keep it, you obviously need it more than me. Your daddy is lucky he got eaten by Cujo, because my momma woulda done way worse." Little Hickshit admitted, and even though Billy never met the woman, he believed what she said ten thousand percent.

Billy, emotional fucking *breakdown* over, head on straight, tapped out another cigarette. Snick went the lighter and he inhaled. MUCH better. He knew where he was now, and could tell where to go. If this place was the same time as Hawkins, just an *ultra* shitty version of Hawkins, then Neil's pickup would still be on the road.

He could hotwire Neil's pickup easy enough. He knew that there was a utility box in the bed too. He had to arm Little Hickshit, they had to work together to have a chance making out alive.

Marcus, Antoine, and Javier had built themselves up as the defense. Those three did the protecting. He and Sang Hoon prided themselves on agitation and retaliation. Baya and Mei were just.... well, Mahuhulaan (unpredictable).

Billy' own protective role in this scenario was all sorts of *upside down*.

He was used to having someone having *his* back, not the other way around. Well he supposed it was about time to return the favor for what Ant, Marcus and Javier had done for him. He could teach her the ropes. He was younger than she was when he started to fend for himself, and she already proved herself to not be a snot-nosed, coddled geekqueef like her brother.

"This way." He exhaled a calming plume of smoke. "He-Man will lead the way. Stick close Little Hickshit, my really badass breakdown may have fucked us royally." Billy growled out as a gruff whisper, expelling out the smoke through his nose to dry it out.

Of course *he* had to be the one to lose his fucking mind and endanger

their both their lives and not the *grade schooler*. Real solid babysitting, Loga. Maybe he should have given Harrington more credit.

"It's OK." She simply shrugged, like she *understood*.

Something was amiss. Neil had dragged them to THE Killing Tree like he already knew about it. Did that prick know about this tree when he chose this town? Did Neil going absolutely haywire a la 'Apocalypse Now' Colonel Kurtz Friday night really trigger his final lynching?

Or.

Did Neil have this *planned* from the moment they left LA? Did Neil pick this jack-hole town to just bide his time until right time to *murder* him here? Guess it didn't matter now.

He took out the knife with his right hand, and held the cigarette with his left, something pricked the hairs on the back of his neck.

He'd rather cut his own throat to admit it, but when he was little, his flight or fight instinct always naturally erred on *flight*. He had to train himself to join to the 'fight' instinct crowd and eventually it worked.

His nurtured fight instinct thrummed in his veins Friday night. After he mellowed out for a few hours by smoking in some old pumpkin patch, he knew he had to fight back against Neil *somehow*.

But he needed help, he always did.

'Plan A' was to somehow convince Harrington to give him a second fucking *chance*. Of course that blew up in his face. Another classic Loga fuck up there. 'Plan A', just like second chances, rarely worked out anyway, so he settled for 'Plan B' without much bitching.

It did kinda *hurt* though. He had wanted Harrington to eventually see him as someone who hadn't been always such a massive prick. Billy knew he hadn't been this *insufferable* in LA. He was happy once.

Guess that ship had sailed. He jammed his hands into his back jean pockets on reflex, and felt plastic.

Jackpot!

He still had that half a gram of coke he scored last night in Indianapolis!

He would save it for when he really needed to fight. It would give him that *edge* he needed against these mutants. He didn't really relish the thought of doing coke in front of Little Hickshit, but he would give her a quick drug talk first. 'Blow makes you broke. Coke is a joke.'

After all, it's not like he drove *all* the way to Indianapolis last night to just score *mediocre* coke.

Hauling ass to Indianapolis was his half-court shot at the buzzer.

He hit the highway, Poison blaring, after he met up and decked Jonathan *stalker* Byers right in the eye. That would show him to ever call his house, be near his house, or fucking show that photo to that potato shaped junkie chief of police.

Though, astonishingly, the Freak didn't slug him back. Maybe Billy misread him because he bet a guy like *that* fought *dirty*. Or maybe he read him right because he actually *listened* and gave him the film negatives. Well, after he threatened to burn that shack he lived in to the ground with him in it if he didn't.

That was when he left Stalker-boy in the dust with his middle finger in the air.

He knew Neil had *not-so-gently* suggested a few days ago for Susan to go visit that limp-dicked brother of hers this weekend for a reason. But clueless Billy had thought the reason was more innocent, like he wanted to go the next town over and pick up a hooker, or just beat the shit out of him *extra* loud.

Nope.

So, 'Plan B' was to go wrangle that *simpering* bitch Susan back to Neil's house. Billy figured Neil wouldn't go after Sinclair or kill him if Susan's flabby ass sat in the living room babbling about how long she was going to knit his next scarf.

Billy tried to play nice, really. But his pulse jack-hammered in his ears, his hands shook like a junkie, and his chest had clamped his lungs all up on the way. He couldn't get his shit together and he *lost* it. He place kicked a flower pot the way he broke Harrington's windshield, smashing it against the house. Susan fled back into Ted's house to call the cops (again, another classic Loga *success*).

He had to light out, so he treated himself for his last night alive. He got stoned, got stitched up, and got blown from some tweaker. (It's not like he'd get a blow job from the *one* guy he'd been having regular wet dreams about)

Billy swore he was losing his edge since he didn't see Friday night coming *at all*. He just couldn't help that his thoughts constantly swam with a certain brunet with eyes like velvet, skin like sin, and a cock that would positively be *divine* to test his gag-reflex on.

He always knew Steve Harrington threatened his sanity and life. He didn't figure Steve would be the end of him *before* he had a taste of him.

Billy knew Neil banked coming to this 'True American Town' would make him 'gaejeong' (reformed) of his *sick affliction*. Sang Hoon once told him, high as a *satellite* on coke, that his mother believed in gay-reformation and told him and Antoine to fool her into thinking they were straight if they ever wanted her mouth-watering bibimbap again. Sang Hoon was safe because he and Mei were fucking like rabbits.

Again, another classic Loga fuck-up that he believed he could ever fool Neil he was 'Gaejeong' to be arrow straight. *Especially* after Max told him that she had seen him and Ant christening the Camaro.

Still worth it. Billy smirked as he almost tripped over a vine. Little Hickshit saw and laughed at him.

He flipped her the bird.

Unlike now, Friday night Billy was looking and smelling damn fine. He was more than ready to tease some skanks, and harass and flirt with Harrington. But, he nearly shat his Levy's when Neil came for

him like the fucking reaper.

Two days earlier, Friday night

"William. What have I taught you about respect and responsibility?" Neil was an immovable tank in the kitchen as Billy exited his room. Billy's throat sewn itself shut.

"It's the tenet of manhood, sir." Billy shelved any attitude, any trace of emotion into a little lockbox in the back corner of his mind.

"Respect. Definition." Neil didn't show his hand on wherever this was going. This was about to get ugly.

"The act of holding someone in high esteem or honor, sir." Billy had that memorized like angle of his dick.

"Responsibility. Definition." Neil persisted.

"To be answerable and accountable for something within one's power or control." Billy had that memorized like his free-throw stance.

"You have it memorized, but you still haven't learned it." Neil exhaled and Billy fought the urge to click his tongue.

"Susan informed me that heard from people in her book and knitting clubs that you stood up a number of eligible young ladies on dates recently. Is that being respectful?" Neil led and Billy swore the temperature dropped ten degrees in the room. Neil's anger was all glacial, not fire.

This blizzard was just getting started.

"No sir. I was not feeling well, sir. I'll apologize to them at school on Monday and take them out again, sir." Billy straightened his back to attention. He braced his hands behind his back just like Neil taught him, and his drill sergeant before him.

Neil paused. He knew that as a change of subjects. Not good.

"Maxine has not just been going to that arcade, or the Wheeler's

residence, which I had affirmed were the only respectable enough establishments, other than the shopping mall and school, for her to be spending her time. She has, in fact, been in the Byers' residence which, according to my findings, and curiously enough yours, is simply *not responsible*." Neil threw down Billy's research on the kitchen table.

It was the researched articles on Will Byers' disappearance, the chemical spill, and his rough sketches and outlines of the Byers' house. He even found his own conclusions on the mutant in the freezer. His sketches of the mutant in the freezer, hand written questions like "Why was Max there?" and "Why was there no sign of that Freak, his bi-polar mother, or the 'zombie boy' who actually lived in that house?" (Gracias a Deus 'thank god' he hadn't written down *Harrington's* name and just doodled a crown instead).

He had written down conversations he eavesdropped at school and around town about Joyce Byers losing her mind and 'zombie boy'. Billy had 'borrowed' Freakshow's school records for info. He took care to jot down rumors of their deadbeat dad taking off for Indianapolis. He even took down the news reports made by that *crackpot* private-eye Bauman.

Billy could listen, and listen *well*. He observed people since diapers and took to languages like a stripper to a pole.

The thing was, he rarely made the smart decisions with the information he collected. That was always Antoine's strength. He made a stupid decision of leaving his research his glove box where Neil found it all.

"I do not approve either, sir. That night a few months ago when I tried to retrieve her..." Billy paused because in no known universe would he ever say Steve Harrington's name in front of this kaesaekki (son of a bitch). Neil punched him so hard he saw stars. He staggered to the kitchen counter.

'Plantez vos pieds, Luc.' Ant.

"Maxine, because of your lack of due diligence in upholding my list respectable establishments, may have been exposed to this chemical

outbreak that has already killed one young lady. This creature, you found in the Byers residence is a weapon made by the *enemy*. You've allowed her to be seen, exposed!" Neil slugged him again and blacked his vision. Billy had to get himself to stand up to attention. He *had* to.

'Yeah, it's me; don't cream your pants' Steve.

"That is correct, sir." Billy managed to croak out. It wasn't enough. The concrete blow landed to his left ribs and Billy held in a howl. His own words to Max that night echoed in his head.

'You disobeyed me. And you know what happens when you disobey me. I break things.' Himself.

He had assisted and done so much *worse* in South Central, but he didn't live *there* anymore and it wasn't *necessary* anymore. That never stopped him in the *heat* of the moment though. If Billy was going to get broken, he was going to take everyone else down with him. That's how he survived for so long, you fucked shit up before someone could fuck you up. He had the scars to prove it even if they were invisible or long faded.

It was *fact* to him: strike before you're struck.

If Maxine didn't see or listen that if she didn't toe the fucking line that he'd be dead, then fuck *her freedom*. She didn't listen to him to stay in the car the one day in LA, and it almost killed her and Mei. You think she'd learn, but maybe not learning was one of the few things they shared. He'd give her a damn good wake up call to keep himself *alive*. He had enough *self-respect* for that.

He'd do it at the expense of the only thing worth his goddamn time in this horseshit down too: Steve Harrington.

If he had to scare the shit out of her and her little geek friends so Neil wouldn't string him or Sinclair (like he *knew* he did Antoine) then so fucking be *it*. He would be El Lobo Feroz (big bad wolf) because that's what got *results*. That's what kept him *alive*. He and the rest of the crew had to be ruthless and vicious because they weren't involved in a gang.

He'd fuck Maxine's life *some* and give her some much needed *guardrails* if it meant he could keep breathing.

"When I was given the news that you, a delinquent *thug*, had to come under my roof, I gave you one order. Your one order was to look after your younger sister, to protect her from threats foreign and domestic." Neil's face had turned a rare shade of purple that Billy hadn't seen since *the* incident in LA.

It was times like this, and when Neil did a random 'bunk check' on his stuff, that Billy wondered if Neil really understood that he wasn't in *the war* anymore. But, the far off, dark look Neil got in his eyes told Billy in black and white that Neil was still spraying the Na Trang jungle with bullets to mow down 'those commie nigger zipperheads'.

See, whatever Billy endured in South Central, meant *fuck all* compared to what Neil went through in 'Nam. Neil liked to remind him of that with his fists pretty damn frequently lately.

Billy's mouth went cotton dry, what landmine he stepped on to set him off like *this*?! Even with learning about the toxic waste and his supposed sexual dry-spell, he shouldn't be cornering him like the harbinger of the damn *apocalypse*.

Neil gripped three remaining pieces of paper like a pit viper.

He threw one on the table. A photo and a letter from the school. Usually Billy parsed through the mail, but he slipped up at some point.

Their stupid radio club. That cue ball biology teacher sent Neil and Susan a letter and a photo of all of the geekqueefs.

Max was holding Sinclair's hand, and only his hand. FINGERS LACED.

A flash of himself and Antoine, holding hands in Jerry's cramped dining room flit through his memory.

"You used your one warning in Los Angeles. Does this—" Neil punctuated his point with another article, with a police sketch of a kid with a buzz-cut.

Shit. Fucking. MEIRDA.

Neil might as well vacuumed the air out of the room and tear gassed it.

Billy meant to toss *that* article of that crackpot Bauman's ramblings: 'SOVIET COMMUNIST SPY WITH SUPER POWERS running around HAWKINS causes chemical spill'.

"You've allowed the *enemy* to get close to *my* family. The war is HERE and you are useless as *ever* you filthy FAGGOT." Billy saw black and not much else. Pain rocketed through his skull and his hearing warped. He heard a scrape of something familiar. Brass lamp. Another crack of pain at his ribs and Billy grabbed onto something. Kitchen counter. He had to stay standing. He had to. Neil was in full blown 'defend America' mode, and Billy would never fit into his 'America'.

"Merde." Billy wheezed out and he knew he just signed his own death wish. He slipped into French at the worst possible time. Typical fuck up on his part.

"Did you just speak a language other than English in this house?! Is preserving America a *joke* to you?! We are at war and it is your duty to keep Max safe! That's your *only* purpose!" Billy sort of heard Neil, but the white hot pulses of pain bursting through his side and face made it impossible to know his voice was coming from. He didn't know if he was on the floor or upright? Probably somewhere in between.

Billy fought the urge to spit the blood pooling in his mouth because if he dirtied a common room it would only make the suffering worse. He couldn't see Neil because of all the black spots in his vision, but Neil's darkness loomed over him like a body bag.

He couldn't fight back because Neil was *right*.

Billy got that he was a worthless, *mostly-white* trash piece of shit that fucked *wrong*, and lived *wrong*.

"—show the enemy I am committed to America!" Apparently, Neil

had been saying something.

"Yes, sir." Billy choked out on his back. Then that stupid brass lamp hit his ankle and he wondered why he said anything at all.

Billy screamed.

He couldn't stand on his *own* two feet without his crew. He was *nothing* but a sideways fuck-up misfit. When he was a lot younger, a lot skinnier, a lot shorter, and a lot more wide-eyed, he thought he was *right* and everyone was wrong about him. He was something, and they all knew *nothing*. But time after time... he learned it was the opposite.

No matter what his mother cooed and promised, he knew she was just saying those things because she was *supposed* to. It was her *duty* to say she loved him, and that being special was *useful* and *good*.

It *wasn't*.

She should have just coat-hangered him.

It would have been a whole lot *painless* for everyone. Just what was his Maman thinking? What drugs eroded her damn brain to make him think he could *belong* anywhere? To be allowed to be left in *peace*. She should have known he'd never just be *left alone*.

He was stuck on the wrong side of the *sick joke* of the 'American Dream'. He and the misfits he banned together with that were either kicked to the curb, abandoned, shunned, raped, beaten, were all really just... nothing. Gutter trash. Unwanted, undesired, unnecessary, unable.

Unacceptable.

And they knew it, but being together made it OK. (And at times, truly a blast).

Billy *hated* Neil, but all Neil really represented was his own inevitable reality: he was only worth what he didn't fuck up.

But, he always ended up dropping the damn ball anyway.

And now some thirteen year old black kid who Neil saw as 'the enemy' (even though Sinclair had probably never even heard, of much less held, a mac-10), was going to pay for his slip-ups. Lucas Sinclair would end up the next Antoine Kabore.

Suddenly, Billy was kicked through something. Screen door. Not the first time. The pang of cold hit him as hard as the steps he tumbled down.

He landed flat on his back, the wind knocked out of him. He saw stars. With his raw, bludgeoned face he saw literal stars. He could never see this many in LA. And fuck, there was even a full moon.

It reminded him of the book 'Le Petit Prince' Maman always read to him. In fact, all of this reminded him of that book.

Billy was just too *heavy* to return home.

He had a good run though. No one could fault him for it ending this way. He lived longer than most had banked on in LA. He just got too damn careless; he knew it would eventually happen.

'Shoulda just tongue fucked the hell outta Harrington's tonsils when I had the chance. I shoulda done it just to see his cheeks blush. He woulda gotten that classic *flustered* look on his pretty face. He probably would've run to tell that haughty, skinny bitch Wheeler, too. *Dios Mios!* She would have shat. Her. Sears. Brand. Panties. I bet Harrington tastes just like how he hits: like cotton candy.' The absurd scenarios that played through Billy's mind would have made him laugh if he could spare the energy or oxygen. You really do think of the most *dumb* shit right before the end.

Goodnight and good riddance. Fuck you *too* Hawkins, Indiana.

'*Jal Jayo.*' Korean, Sang Hoon

'*Gudnayt*' Tagalog, Bayani

'*Buenas Noches*' Spanish, Javier

'*Wan An*' Mandarin, Mei

'Bonne nuit' French, Antoine, Marcus and Maman.

A flash of light blinded him for a second. Headlights? No, too quick, not bright enough.

"Who's there? Who's trespassing?! This is private property!" Billy was distantly aware of a rustling and snapping in the woods, and the heavy, strident gait of Neil running after *someone*.

Billy's eyes rolled around in his head. Whoever was in the woods was absolutely *fucked* once Neil found them. Neil was in full 'Nam flashback mode and knew the forest like the back of his hand. Billy sucked in a lung full of cold air. He didn't have time to take a fucking time-out on the bench.

He grunted and groaned to make his right arm work. Right pocket. Keys. Camaro. Get. Gone. Loga lives to see another day! Fuck the odds.

His hands shook and his lungs had twisted and cramped up in his chest. His pulse flooded his ears and he had to gather himself and *chill out*. He needed a smoke, and a plan. Harrington. Fuck, he needed his help to keep tabs on Sinclair. Harrington white-knighted the geeks, so he'd have to at least hear him out.

No.

Harrington *owed* him his help because that beautiful naïve jackass was covering for the geekqueefs, and it was going to backfire *spectacularly*.

Billy crawled, scrambled, and finally limped to the driver's side door of the Camaro that he and Antoine scrimped and saved their blood and drug money for.

Out of sheer grit, was he able to hoist himself into his Camaro, crank the ignition, and roar away from death.

Present time

"Never thought I'd be happy to see this eye-sore." Billy and Little

Hickshit had finally made it to Neil's rusted pickup, though it looked like it had dredged out of a swamp, or towed from a coal mine. With his sleeve, Billy wiped the black soot off the windshield, windows and side view mirrors as best he could. He peered through the cab, filthy and ancient. Maybe it wouldn't be so easy to hot-wire it after all.

He tried the passenger side handle of the pickup. Locked.

Billy took the knife and with one decisive blow struck the window with the butt of the knife, shattering it. He cleared the glass and popped open the door.

"Told you. He-Man." He heard from behind him and he bit out a scoff.

He grabbed Neil's old camo jacket from the passenger seat. It was lucky Neil hadn't been wearing it. Little Hickshit needed a jacket; Billy could see her shivering. If they ran into any Cujos with eyes, it may even help hide her.

With a few jagged, and quick cuts, he sliced the sleeves down so it'd be sorta close to fitting her.

"Put this on Little Hickshit, I need you agile, not frozen." He handed it to her and she scrunched her nose. He was about to fucking lose it because for *once* he just needed someone to not *fight* him on something so small.

She put it on.

"It smells like my Aunt Marion." She sniffed the sleeve cautiously. Billy rolled his eyes as he looked for a map. He would need a map if they where to go next. He found it in the glove box along with an ancient flashlight.

"Well then, your Aunt Marion is a bourbon kind-of woman." Billy replied back and smoothed out the map on the seat of the pickup. He caught sight of *that* marker. He picked it up and uncapped it. He was not going to be a pansy over a damn *marker*. He drew a circle on the map, the edge of the circle being the pickup, and the center being the tree. A pretty large territory.

"What you doing?" Little Hickshit scrambled up and Billy scooted down the bench to the driver's seat giving her room to sit. He began to make circles around the same size in a circular ring around the map starting with the first one.

"Estimating the size of their territory. See, we haven't seen or heard another Cujo, so that means he was little boss of this area. He has to belong to a pack or gang, so there have to be other Cujos at areas around this size in a ring around town. The Cujos are the corner boys, low man on totem pole." Billy explained, he didn't really know if he was talking out his ass or not, but he had to *try* to be smart about this.

Little Hickshit nodded as if she absorbed what he said.

"That Cujo lured us both in here by dragging you here. It could have killed you easy like it did Neil, but it didn't. The big boss, the Kingpin, is trying to corral us or something." Billy rambled before he even understood what he said.

"Why does it want us alive, Big Cityshit?" She sounded just as confused as he did.

"We're the two hardest people in Hawkins." Billy raised his eyebrows and she wasn't convinced.

"Fine, fuck if I know. All I got is that the closer we get to the center of their territory the stronger and smarter these mutants are going to be." Billy continued to draw circles inside the ring of circles he already drew until he got to the center of the crude 'territory' map he drew.

"You sure curse a lot...wait, I know there." She pointed to the center circle: some woods. "I'm not allowed to play there anymore because that's where Will Byers got lost." That was right. It was the forest between the Byer's...and Harrington's places.

Was that why Harrington was there that night with Max and the other geekqueefs? Did they know something ruled those woods? That meant Steve really was *protecting* the kids from the mutants.

It would so explain the *nail bat*.

FUCK.

He called him a damn *Paper Knight*, his own take on 'zhilaohu'(paper tiger). It meant he looked tough, but was all for show. That wasn't Harrington at all. White knight Harrington wasn't *playing voodoo sacrifice* with the Cujos, he was protecting them from an *attack* and hiding the evidence.

No wonder Steve left him high and dry at the quarry.

He had no time for a pity party over burned bridge, though. He shelved his churning guilt for later.

"That's where the king is. I bet you my best pair of earrings. And we gotta kill the King before he corners us." He drew a crown in the middle of the circle, in the center of the woods.

"Keep your tacky jewelry...do you think any of them are like Alien?" She asked and Billy ignored her true statement about his jewelry as turned to her, jaw dropped in confusion.

"You're dressed in pink, play with Barbies, skip damn rope, and are a nine year old girl scout. How in the hell are you into horror mov—" Billy heard a far off shriek. "Close the door, slowly and quietly." Billy whispered and Erica *blessed be the lord* Sinclair actually *listened* to him. Billy put the knife in his mouth slid the back window of the pick up open cautiously.

The shriek sounded kinda far off, maybe half a block.

He pushed himself through the back window, Dieu Merci (thank god) his slim frame came in handy for *once*. He bent over and opened the utility box in the bed, hoping to hit pay dirt. He fumbled around as another shriek pealed through the forest. He grabbed onto the handle of something. Claw hammer. Perfect.

He slipped back into the cab and slid the window closed. He took the knife from his teeth and checked the side view mirror. Another Cujo bristled in the middle of the road behind him. He slunk down, Little Hickshit followed suit.

He didn't have time to hotwire the pickup, they would just have to kill Cujo two here and now. He looked over to Little Hickshit who, while tense, hadn't pissed her tights yet. Good.

"Ok Little Hickshit, you want revenge on Cujo for your mangling your hair, right?" Billy flashed his eyes and smirked like mad. His blood began to surge, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up like needles and adrenaline flooded his system. He could really look forward to killing more of these Cujos.

Little Hickshit gave him a thumbs up and Billy snapped his Jaws with a click in glee. He knew she wouldn't be dead weight! He handed her the claw hammer and she gripped it with both hands, which didn't look as out of place as it *should* have in her pink painted fingernails. He heard another shriek, farther off. Two of them.

She glanced up from the hammer and made solid eye contact with him. She looked ready and set, but Billy wasn't convinced that just because she had nerves of steel, she could scrap too.

"Forget whatever your Denmother said about putting together birdhouses. Use one hand and put your whole body into your swing, not just your arm. Whole body, hips and all. Think...Thriller." He cautioned as a hoarse whisper.

She made the classic dance motion and grinned knowingly. Good, maybe she wasn't such a hick if she liked MJ.

He knew she couldn't put out much power behind her swing, but the skin on these Cujos was soft like frog skin, not tough like a lizard. She wouldn't need much.

He heard a chirp, that thing had probably heard them and was alerting its novia (girlfriend).

"I see one, our seven o'clock. I'm gonna go out there and slice Cujo Two like birthday cake. If you want, only get out of the truck when I've gotten the attention of both of them. Got it? Be smart, wait for the right moment li—" Billy got interrupted by Erica Diana Sinclair, a grade schooler.

"Donna did Cujo in the movie. I'm not slow, you know. I'll let you do most of the work, you seem to *like* it....Big Cityshit." Little Hickshit rolled her eyes, but fist bumped him on the shoulder.

"You have no idea." Billy winked and knew his eyes must be lit up like times fucking square.

They did *their* handshake and Billy grinned with all of this teeth and Little Hickshit managed a small one too.

Game time.

He clicked the driver's side door handle and kicked it open with a sudden metallic bang. Billy vaulted from the driver's seat and planted his feet on the sticky pavement.

Cujo greeted him by opening his big, fat vagina face and gunned towards him.

"Wanna go at me you ugly fuck?! Come to Daddy, I'll show you a real good time!" Billy taunted, his pulse hammering in his ears. Cujo Two raged towards him with scrape of its claws on the asphalt. He knew it was a feint though. Out of his periphery he saw something move in the underbrush. Cuntface number three was waiting for him to make a move on its novio (boyfriend), Cujo two.

But, Billy wasn't *born yesterday*.

While these Cujos fronted all nasty and bad, they couldn't shoot him like gangbangers did. He had the upper hand in close range combat, he could literally kick their balls into their throats in if he got disarmed.

When Billy Loga kicked something, he disfigured it. *Permanently*.

Billy waited for the Cujo Two to pounce; its serrated teeth glistened, salivating for him like all those dull skanks at school. But what this thing didn't know was he was the el Lobo Feroz of Hawkins.

He was the one with teeth that were all the better to EAT things with.

He chose a reverse grip on the knife. Billy didn't know what changed

between the forest and now, but he wasn't *afraid* anymore.

He pivoted quick to the left and got in a low horse stance. In a knife fight, you had to use your hands in tandem, with his left hand he punched Cujo Two's right leg up and thrust high and deep with the knife and slashed low hacking it open. Billy's shoulder got nicked by some of the petal teeth, but you just *always* got cut. He kneed the bitch hard in the gut for payback.

Cujo Two let out a squeal and collapsed.

Billy waited for the next attack. Marcus taught him that dogs were pretty fucking predictable, and this mutant one was no different. It's only weapon was its teeth, its claws didn't matter.

So when Cuntface leapt over its fallen little fuck-buddy, Billy pivoted again and lunged at it, getting his arms just behind the petals of its stupid, greedy mouth. If he kept moving, Cuntface couldn't latch onto him like Marcus' jumpy Doberman had done *twice* back in LA.

Using the mutant's momentum against it, he swung Cuntface around in a tight hug and sliced with his knife long ways down its side. It flailed in pain and Billy got the upper-hand by kicking his left leg up and over the mutant to straddle it and slam it down.

Billy forced all his weight into his left arm to pin the screeching Cuntface to the sticky asphalt. He mercilessly stabbed in and cleaved up and around its rib cage, aiming for whatever vital organs these things had.

"How do *you* like it? Huh? Being *hunted*?! You stupid bitch I'm gonna EAT you ALIVE!" While Cuntface thrashed its muscle mass beneath him on the asphalt, Billy knew Cujo Two had to be winding up for a second swing. He had to immobilize Cuntface, NOW. He yanked out the knife and this time stabbed it right into its throat to sever either the carotid or jugular. Either would do.

Goop splooshed out. *Rank.*

The hairs on his triceps pricked up because Cujo Two was almost on top of him.

Shit.

He rolled off the hopefully dead one to brace himself for the flower mouth when Cujo Two stopped, and yelped.

"Hiiiiiiyaaaaaaaah!" Little Hickshit's battle cry needed work, but he had heard worse.

She had impaled the claw of the hammer a good inch or two in Cujo Two's stubby, slimy tail. She heaved the hammer back out of its tail with a sick sucking sound. She did it with one hand *and* she used her whole body to swing again. Quick fucking study!

She struck Cujo Two again and her distraction was all Billy needed to finish the job.

Cujo Two's back leg swiped at Little Hickshit and she tumbled back. Billy couldn't tell if she had gotten hurt or not as he utilized every muscle group to launch himself off the street. He stretched out and slashed down once, twice, then thrust in and jerked up its exposed neck.

It took forever for Cujo Two to stop twitching.

"That was for my 'do, pendaiyo." Little Hickshit swallowed hard and assumed a victory stance with wide legs and fists on her hips. Billy, sprawled out and panting like he just wind-sprinted six blocks, gave her a *look*. How did she know 'asshole' in Spanish? Had he said it at some point? He guessed he had.

Javier would be so proud.

"Your pronunciation is off, Little Hickshit. Pen-dey-ho." Billy cleaned the knife as best he could and put away. "Let's hot-wire that piece of junk before more of these come 'round." Billy winced sitting up. He ached all over. Little Hickshit sighed in that dramatic way only touch bitches like her or Mei could pull off.

"You're welcome, Big Cityshit. Let's find water first cuz I'm thirsty and you're all gross and slimy." She made a face that Billy could only assume meant 'I know what you said meant 'thank you' in *asshole*.'

Erica offered *her* hand this time to lift *him* up. He took it, but hefted his own weight up.

"Lead the way girl scout, it's time you earned your GTA merit badge from He-Man." Billy busted his lip open again he smiled so bright and wide. To think he'd genuinely smile *here* of all places with *Erica Sinclair* of all people.

She smiled back just as big.

Hello! Sorry for such a lengthy chapter, this one got away from me a little bit!

Thank you for all the support so far, I hope that the backstory with the characters has cleared some things up a bit. If I got any language translations wrong I do apologize.

I will get into more about Billy and his languages, and Erica and how they get along with later. I hope it wasn't too much or too jarring for you all, but please let me know my feedback because I love using different languages in my fics. :)

Also I hope I am not offending anyone who has served in war, I am merely showing how ptsd can effect people's behaviors if left untreated. If anyone is deeply offended by this let me know and I'll try to find a way to rectify it.

I am breadcrumbing some other co traversal elements in my fic for later so feel free to let me know what you think about that if you picked up in it!

Anyway, please drop me a line and let me know if my characters are too OOC or not, I am trying my very hardest with what I have :)

thanks again!

-TL

3. A Thousand Words

The Paper Knight and the Killing Tree

Chapter Three: A Thousand Words

Steve held the cooling coffee mug, but unlike the coffee, his frustration simmered hot.

"Let me understand you completely, Neil Hargrove, tried to *lynch* my little girl and his own *son*, but he didn't. And not only that, he has been killed and now you can't find either my daughter or his son? What in the hell is going on?!" Vivian Sinclair's finger pointed like a gun between Susan Hargrove and Hopper. This was exactly why Steve didn't want to get on her bad side; he could easily imagine a real gun in her hand.

"Vivia—"

"That is Mrs. Sinclair to you! I can't believe you allowed a bigot murderer to live—"

"Neil is—was a patriot. He was sick an—" Susan Hargrove interrupted Vivian Sinclair. 'Wrong move, Max's mom.' Vivian Sinclair burst to her feet, veins and tendons in her neck bulging. Her husband put his hand on her arm, but she flung it off and he didn't try again.

Not even her husband wanted on her bad side.

Dr. Sinclair made good money as the only optometrist (or was it the other fancier title oph... something?) in the hospital, but aside from that, he didn't really know much else about him, or come to think of it Vivian Sinclair.

"You DARE defend your husband when he tried to murder your son?! My daughter!? Let me get my hands on you!" Steve was about to witness Vivian Sinclair throw down.

"Dear—"

"Don't *dear* me, Howard or I swear I'll divorce you." Vivian Sinclair

bit out.

Three Thanksgivings ago, Steve's mother disclosed to his father that she had him followed around by a PI, which of course unveiled an affair. She threatened to show the photos and divorce as she coolly sipped her glass of French Savennieres (which cost as much as his father's *good* suit).

That was a nice holiday.

It was just a power play (Steve knew those) but Vivian Sinclair definitely wasn't playing one.

Steve debated with a tapping of his right heel how to exactly deal with his cresting temper, and get what he wanted at the same time.

Steve needed *control* this situation since Hopper *couldn't*.

It was a bit of a joke around town that Hopper could never stay on a woman's good side. He looked ready to tap out against Susan Hargrove and Vivian Sinclair.

Sandpaper grated the back of Steve's throat. He couldn't allow this whole situation to flip and sink like a capsized sailboat. The air in the room spun like a cyclone from the tension and he had to find the right line, tack, and get everyone *focused*.

He eyed the mostly full mugs of coffee held by everyone and the box of donuts and fruit in the middle of the worn wooden table.

Losing his temper would escalate *everything* like if he had gone major leagues with his bat back at the *crime scene*.

From when Steve was gifted his first shiny tricycle, Steve learned to pick his battles. He polished and smoothed any rough edges of his feelings. His mother dispensed hugs like currency and his father would only ruffle his hair if introducing him to someone else who did the same to his own son.

'If you don't have anything nice, don't say anything at all.' - Father

'No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.' - Mother

'You'll barely even know we will be gone, Steven. We will bring you back something nice.' – Father

'Behave yourself for Nana while we are gone. You're the man of the house and we are counting on you.' – Mother

Steve slipped up when he lost his temper and flushed the keys to his mother's Mercedes to make them stay home. He was sent to Wilton Academy (third best mixed gender boarding school in Massachusetts) to be his 'home away from home.'

Bullshit.

To this day, Steve didn't know if they did it as a punishment, if they thought that physical distance would make everything easier, or if they just someone else to carrot and stick him into being son they could brag about.

It backfired.

His father got stuck with a son who he couldn't even bribe admissions to get into college! Eh, he'd probably just lie and say he got into Northwestern to his golf buddies anyway.

At Wilton Academy, Steve received tons of letters all telling him about their business trips and what Nana was up to, but never much in the way of questions about him. His sixth birthday card was postmarked three days past his birthday, and Steve wished he hadn't noticed. He did receive a lot of money into his own student account, so, that had to count for *something*.

He remembered telling Davie (a boy with white blonde hair and freckles like a golf ball had dimples) that *he* left his parents, not other way around.

"Same Stevie. My dad says 'time is money'. My parents have a lot of money, but no time for me, so I just made no time for them." Davie jumped from brick to brick on the walk, concentrating too hard for such easy hops, but Steve got it. *"Wanna go play boules?!"* Davie exclaimed. *Steve knew from that day that Davie from Wilmington Delaware would be his absolute best friend. Davie and Stevie.*

Well, until Memorial Day weekend 1978. Eighth grade.

"Just try to hit my mom, you'll see what happens! She didn't know what was going on, she wasn't even here! She was in Indianapolis!" Max hissed, blue eyes blazing that reminded him of Billy. Sorta.

Billy's gaze on him always tilted on that edge of hunger and repulsion.

"Don't talk to my mom that way!" Lucas' temper flared. Their own mother's kept them from lunging at each other. This was a *shitshow*.

"Indianapolis? That's where Billy said he was going when I saw him Saturday afternoon." Jonathan murmured sporting a real bright shiner. Steve had wondered why Jonathan had bothered showing up here with the rest of them, and now it fell into place, he ran into Billy, and he hit him.

"You mean when you tried to help him, and he punched you in the face and threatened to *burn your house to the ground* with you *in* it." Nancy's voice slapped the room. That made almost, almost made Steve snort in laughter.

That sounded like Billy alright.

But seriously, Nancy called *him* bullshit? Who was the one bitching about what Billy did over *thirty hours ago* when his dad tried to murder him and he's been stuck in the Upside-Down for past *seven and a half hours*?

Jonathan wasn't made of glass. He knew first hand.

Steve, unnoticed, slowly rose from the table and collected an old cafeteria tray the police station used for its mismatched mugs. Complete opposite of his own house, they definitely owned more high-ball glasses than coffee mugs and *everything* matched.

His father almost dropped his favorite scotch tumbler when Steve requested to be sent back to Wilton for second grade.

Davie was right, *leave* before you're *left*.

A wide-eyed and smartly dressed Steve Harrington soon learned all the right northeastern slang words, wore the right brand sweater vests, and laughed (but not too hard) at all the right jokes. He glossed over tales to his basketball friends on the playground how his dad insured famous paintings and met Julius Erving at his mansion. He casually mentioned in the dugout that his mom knew everything there was to know about baseball cards, and even verified a Mickey Mantle.

He even told the boys on his sailing team that his mother and father always helped sponsor a team in the famous "Mac" sailing race on Lake Michigan.

They hung on his every word.

Steve's chest billowed with helium because his parents long, boring letters weren't boring to these boys! For once his parents were useful.

After jumping for joy in the middle of the outfield, causing weird look from his coach, a switch flipped and Steve embodied easy-breezy-lemon-squeezy. He lounged and bounced about Wilton, all slack angles, soft laughs, and easy smiles and those stuck with him until Nancy. Yeah, sure, Steve missed being untouchable, unshakable, unflappable, but he didn't get why wanted it back *now*.

'You'll never get over Princess Wheeler with an attitude like that, King Steve.'

"Wait, Billy saw you *Saturday*!? It was *you* who called the house and talked to Billy?! *Why*?!" Max's hair whipped to the side. Oh, that's why she thought he talked to Billy on Saturday. She must have thought Billy had talked to him, not Jonathan. Because, yeah why would *Jonathan* call their house....well, come to think of it, why would *he* call their house either?

"Uh, well, Will told me he thought something bad was happening at your house. He kept egging me to check it out...so I went by Friday and... um... well, I guess I can say it *now*. I saw Mr har—your dad, um, almost kill Billy. I mean, it looked... bad. He had a big lamp... So, I took a photo with a flash to get your dad's attention, and it worked. Almost too well." Jonathan *saved* Billy?! Steve's stomach

turned. Not that if he hadn't gone to the quarry, he would have gone to Billy's....but STILL.

"I met up with Billy Saturday evening. I wanted to help, but he basically told me to stuff it. It was weird though. He hit me like he wanted a fight, but at the same time he wasn't surprised at all when I told him about my own shit dad. I should have told someone, you Nancy, yesterday...but Billy said he had a plan B. He said he was going to Indianapolis to 'unfuck this whole situation'." Jonathan continued, face grim.

Steve couldn't allow his own guilt to rock himself out of control. Steve knew he himself was obviously 'plan A' and it didn't take much of a genius to figure out Billy's 'plan B' was trying to find Max's mom.

But. None. Of this. Mattered. Anymore! Him keeping calm wasn't enough. He needed to pull a power play.

Steve, before the Demodogs and Nancy, had enjoyed and often relied on how he could use his mood to alter others' emotions around him. At Wilton he could spin a whole gaggle of students against a bully, help a teacher calm a hyped up class, or rally his basketball team within four heartbeats.

His placid attitude paired with his *cute* looks cemented a solid reputation at Wilton Academy as *cool*. The older boys didn't think of him as a threat to their status, and girls always liked that he said 'thank you, Kate, Sarah, Mary, Laura, Shannon, Elizabeth...' when they passed him cards with curly handwriting.

Girls only passed Steve cards because he was the only boy who didn't believe girls had cooties. Why would he when he liked holding hands with both girls *and* boys in circle time?

Sure, the other boys *sometimes* would say he had cooties, but Steve always remembered what his father told him: that only the weak minded let others get to them. *Cool* kids didn't let *anything* get to them. The others eventually stopped trying to pick on him when he just turned it on them and flippantly make fun of the bully's haircut, his mom, or his mismatched socks. God, he was such a bratty little shit.

"Susan, did Billy find you in Indianapolis?" Vivian Sinclair's voice could make a razor cut dull.

"Yes.... Oh God. But, I swear I had no idea something like this would happen. You must believe me, Billy was... *manic*! He wasn't making *sense*! He kicked a flower pot at me like a rocket! He kept going on mutants, and Neil, and he was *so* bruised up. I thought he was going to go crazy or get into more trouble so I went inside to call the police. When I came out, he was gone." Susan started crying again and Max hugged her tightly.

A wave of hot anger foamed in Steve's gut, he had *enough*.

"Your son was obviously terrified and was trying to bring you home and you, YOU failed him!" Vivian Sinclair had a point, but it was clear to even Steve that Susan was a hair away from *another* mental breakdown which was just getting Max defensive.

Steve placed his own half full mug on the tray, and next took Jonathan's full one from him, then Nancy's from her smooth hands. He was still being mostly ignored as he took Max's and Lucas' full milk cups too. He made sure to take Mrs. Sinclair's and Mrs. Hargrove's full, steaming mugs of coffee next.

"My mom didn't fail anyone! Billy is mean, and a criminal, and Billy isn't EVEN her son, you moron!" Max snarled and banged the table. Good thing he got the mugs.

"Don't call my mom a moron! This is all your family's fault! Your family messed up EVERYTHING and now my sister is demodog-food because of *you*!" Lucas hollered, slamming his fist on the table in response.

Steve now had to move fast to save their friendship... budding relationship *thing*. God, he was really the last guy who should be trying to salvage *any* relationship.

He pried Hopper's mug from his sweaty hands.

The familiar sensation of being the center of attention prickled up his pine as he kept his breathing even and his movements smooth. Steve

nearly smirked. It worked.

King Steve: cover album edition.

When Steve was first crowned king in the fourth grade, he understood the immense *sway* he held on the people around him. He trounced Bart, a sixth grader with perfect teeth, the reigning king of sailing club, in the annual knot tying competition. Steve broke Wilton Academy's record by ten seconds by tying the eight most important boating knots perfectly.

He broke *Bart's* Wilton Academy record.

A small nostalgic part of Steve still prided himself on that. Steve knew he wasn't good at much, but he could still tie a bow line, reef knot, a sheet bend, a round turn and two half hitches, and others just as quick and knew when to use which one.

He had noticed right away the nooses Neil knotted were crude and knowing he could have tied a better *noose* than Neil caused Steve's hands to quiver slightly picking up the box of donuts and fruit, putting them also on the tray.

"Steve what are you doing?" Nancy squinted her eyes in *that* way. Steve continued to float evenly to the sink with a practiced ease that was really damn *necessary* right now.

"Yeah, bring back my coff..." Hoppers voice trailed off as Steve one by one dumped out each of the contents of the mugs into the sink, watching the steam rise as the hot coffee hit the metal of the sink.

Then, one by one he tossed away every donut and danish, and shelved the fruit.

Silence.

Everyone was looking at him as if he lost his mind, but they should all look in a mirror. Steve's anger burned deep and thick like a dormant volcano he couldn't *allow* becoming active.

"You are all *Bullshit*." Steve quietly smiled to people he had come to call friends. Some had tear tracks down their faces, some had dark

bags under their eyes, some stank like B.O.

Steve was two for three. He needed sleep and a change of shirt, not Kleenex.

"Billy came to me Friday night. He told me he knew about the Demodogs and he asked me where Lucas was going to be all weekend. I thought Billy was a racist and was going to harass him, I was wrong. I was his plan A, and maybe if I had listened to him we wouldn't be here. Or maybe not. But. It. Doesn't. Matter." Steve continued, his voice rolling like a swift moving river. His tone and noise level wouldn't be out of place on a golf course.

"What matters is that Billy and Erica have been in the Upside-down for over seven and a half hours. It's *back* and possibly more dangerous than ever, and Neil was killed by one of the monsters living there. We need to work *together* to find them, not drain each other." He motioned to the sink like he planned that metaphor, which he didn't but *whatever*.

"We all want the same thing, to get them back. So, let's cut the bullshit and stop trying to be *right*, and try to be *smart*." Steve finished, purposefully leaning languidly against the counter, face soft and gaze purposefully not landing on anyone in particular.

"... " Nancy's wide eyes said it all.

"Steve's right. I'm sorry Max." Lucas murmured.

"I'm sorry, too." Max relented.

"I also owe you an apology, Susan. My emotions got the best of me, I should be more composed." Vivian Sinclair inhaled and exhaled deeply, shoulders lowering.

"It's alright. I... you're right about a few things, I am far from perfect and I should have.... It's just hard because Billy...." Hopper clamped down on Susan's arm and mouthed a secret 'thank you' to Steve.

Hopper *totally* owed him.

"Jim Hopper, you owe Susan and I, a full explanation about this...

Upside-Down." Vivian Sinclair ordered and Hopper leaned back in his chair, fingers itching.

"I'll make another pot of coffee.... " Steve said to himself, it would keep him busy since that speech actually made his pulse race. That stupid duck metaphor, calm on the surface, freaking the FUCK out below really hit home. 'King Steve cover album edition' was rusty.

Off in the corner of the office a brand-new fax machine beeped and whirled. Steve reflexively wrinkled his nose in disgust. His own house had a personal fax that sent him instructions and notes from his parents. God forbid they *call* instead.

During drunken and sleepless nights, Steve would shred all their notes, only to do precisely what they wanted the next morning anyway. Man, he *had* become a pushover.

'Plant your feet, Harrington.'

"The US government made everyone here, along with others, sign a confidentiality agreement to keep from speaking about it. The—" Hopper was cut off by Lucas.

"It's another dimension where Demigorgons and Demodogs live. It's where Will got trapped and the Mind Flayer possessed him and tried to take over Hawkins before with Demodogs. It's... the worst. It's worse than hell and... Erica... " Lucas trailed off silently.

"You're telling me a...demon dog dragged Erica into another dimension? Lucas Michael Sinclair this Dungeons and Dragon business has gone too far." Vivian Sinclair's voice didn't blaze with heat it once did.

"It's real Mrs. Sinclair." Nancy spoke up, voice wooden. "I've been there...So has Hopper and Mrs. Byers. One of the monsters there killed Barbara. She didn't die from the lab chemicals. It's...awful, all decay and death." Nancy said softly.

For the first time Vivian Sinclair's face slacked vulnerable. Steve looked away to mess with the coffee filters.

"Billy is with her though. You know Billy's tough, if anyone could

survive there it'd be him." Max reassured.

"Yeah, I was there when he beat Steve to a pulp, but that doesn't take much an IQ." Lucas quipped. "No offense." Lucas directed at Steve.

"Jonathan's probably more offended." Steve's grin was all humor.

"Billy isn't stupid....Friday night after I got back from Mike's, I found a lot of papers in our living room about the Upside-Down. Billy figured out about it all on his own. I didn't tell him anything. He even figured out some about El too." Max continued and Steve nodded when Lucas locked eyes with him.

"Wait, Billy found out about El?" Lucas asked.

Hopper remained silent, but his eyes shifted to his office. Great, had she been in his office listening the whole time?

"Not... *exactly*. He researched some articles, and Mike's parents saying she was a Soviet spy." Max murmured.

"... oh, that is probably what triggered Neil." Susan whispered. "If he found that a spy... he...sometimes still thinks-thought he was fighting in *the war*. He got confused, paranoid and..." Susan was about to break down again. Steve logically got it. She lost her husband (a bigoted murderous one), who was also the stepfather to her daughter, but Steve couldn't churn out any extra sympathy for her.

Steve plunged his hand in his pocket and rubbed Billy's silver pendant between his thumb and forefinger.

"Who's Elle?" Vivian Sinclair asked and on cue El wordlessly exited Hopper's office. Her big, searching brown eyes were smudged with eyeliner and she pointed her herself.

"Damnit, Jane we talked about this. You stay in my office until I give *my* say. Fine. Everyone, this is my daughter, adopted, Jane or El whichever you prefer. She isn't a spy, but she is *gifted*. She can help us find Erica and Billy in the Upside-down." Hopper rubbed his temple with his right hand and El nodded.

"Hi." She greeted simply. Vivian Sinclair raised an eyebrow in

skepticism.

"Mom, she has *super powers*. She can find Erica. All she needs is a photo. A picture." Lucas insisted and Hopper shot him and El a sharp look.

"Jane. No. Just a search, not *anything else*, for now." Hopper's voice found its strength again. About time Hop.

Vivian Sinclair opened her pocketbook and took out her wallet and a small photo of Erica with big poofy pigtails in a Girl Scout uniform.

"My little girl is named Erica Diana Sinclair. She's ten years old, and a girl scout. She's top of her class and she's street smart too. Please, help me find out where she is so I can bring her home." Vivian Sinclair patted the semi-matte wallet sized photo of Erica. Her hand wavered but her voice didn't. Definitely a 'Joyce Byers' of a parent. Before today, envy would have snaked in Steve's kidneys since his own mother wouldn't go to Wilton, much less the Upside-down, for him.

But this wasn't about King Steve's *mommy issues*.

"I will find her. Friends help friends." El took the photo and studied it innocently.

"Picture of Billy. Please." El held out her hand. Max and Susan looked at each other. 'Oh you have got to be kidding me. They had to have one, ONE picture of Billy, right?'

"I don't have a photo of Billy on me. We don't...even have a good one in the house. Billy hates photos and Neil is-was *very* particular..." Susan frowned and that dormant pilot light of anger within Steve flickered to life again. No matter how many times his parents forgot to check in, they at least had photos of him up in the house. They had *proof* they were a family. Billy...Billy didn't.

The coffee machine finally began to drip.

"How do you not have a single good photo of Billy in your whole house?" Steve asked, still leaning against the countertop, he couldn't help it. Steve wanted to be a *jerk*. He wished he could channel his

inner jackass like Billy and really *let loose* once in a while. Consequences be *damned*.

"Why do you care anyway? It's none of your business." Max bristled.

"I knew I should have kept at least one copy of mine." Jonathan mumbled.

"I need both. It's stronger. It's planning. It's learning." El turned, unblinking at Steve and he wondered why she chose to stare at *him*.

And *what* was stronger? The whole Upside-down? The hair on the back of Steve's arms rose up in anxiety. What if... No.

Billy was so strong he could dent the hood of his e23 with his *fists*. He could plan well too, (his idea of bringing Susan back wasn't a bad one), and he learned a lot all on his own.

"Max, were you serious about Billy having a record? I'll call Santa Barbara precinct to send us up a mug shot...we just got this new fax... thing." Hopper's chest rose out like he wanted an outlet for his anger. Steve hoped Hopper wouldn't crack and get physical. He couldn't stop him if he did. Jonathan was too busy *moping* to notice Hop.

Steve always had excelled at other tactics aside from fist-fights, especially at Wilton where he could get expelled easily for it. He got Bart expelled for it. Kinda.

Bart's reputation had been dragged behind a truck after the sailing competition. Figuring Bart would beat him up for humiliating him, Steve made it a point to avoid him. He knew in the marrow of his bones he didn't stand a chance against the older boy.

'*You're lucky you can tie knots well because you're too dumb for anything else you stupid pussy!*' Bart had yelled at him across the quad at lunch in front of everyone.

Steve naively, thought 'that was it' and let it roll off his back. He wouldn't give attention to it because it was true.

But ignoring Bart caused something drastic and unexpected.

Davie showed up to his room with a ripped sweater and a bloody nose. It dawned on Steve that if you were going to be cool, going to be King, your friends became targets. He didn't stew long on how to get Bart back because he learned from his parents how to win. He sent Davie to the nurse and then got all the basketball and baseball boys together.

"Um. Duh. He acted like he was a big deal for stealing cars and beating up people. There was even this one time with..." Max caught herself. "He never did anything in Santa Barbara where we lived. He mostly hung out with his creepy friends where *he* grew up in South Central." Steve knew she was protecting Billy from *something*.

Steve doubted Max hated Billy as much as she swore she did.

"Mom, he's a psycho and he just going to leave Erica to the Demodogs and she—" Vivian Sinclair cut Lucas off mid sentence with shove to his head. Hopper began to thumb through a book and dial a number.

"Lucas. Not. Another. Word." Vivian Sinclair's diamond hard stare sliced up to Steve, expecting something.

Steve thumbed the necklace in his pocket.

"Lucas... I don't think he'd just leave her. He was pretty mad about me letting Max *play* with the Demodogs." Steve sighed and Lucas reeled.

"Play!? You were protecting us!" Lucas shouted, but Hoppers voice took command.

"Yes, hello I'm Jim Hopper, Chief of police of Hawkins, Indiana." Hopper began. El's eyes could melt the plastic phone with her intensity. Everyone fell silent.

"My badge number is 511. I need to speak to your records department. It's urgent." Hopper pressed with a hiss.

Pause.

"No. Chief Jim *Hopper*. HAWKINS Indiana. Outside of INDIANAPOLIS. Just patch me through to records." Hopper's face reddened with 'if he

was face to face with this prick he'd...'

Pause.

"No, I can't hold! I need to speak to records NOW." Hopper rubbed his eyes. "About time, Hello Carol, this is Jim—"

An unseen force pressed the speakerphone button on the phone. El.

The coffee sputtered to a stop, brewing finished.

"Yeah I know, the deputy from Indianapolis. What do you want?" Hopper barely restrained himself from correcting her.

Steve, amused and feeling merciful; poured Hopper another coffee and handed it to him. Guess he was that '*nice guy*'.

"I'm going to need a shot and rap sheet for Hargrove, William." Hopper continued.

"Birthdate."

"Uhhh...I think he's seventeen. So...1966..." Hopper looked to Susan and Max. Max made the number four, then the number ten with her fingers. "April 10th, 1966."

Susan Hargrove smiled lightly at Max. Steve wondered absently if they celebrated Billy's birthday. Something told him *no*. At least Steve's parents *usually* remembered his on the right date.

"NIF. No record of a Hargrove, William with that birthdate." They could hear Carol finish typing.

Susan held up a finger and Hopper pressed down his hand on the speaker.

"Try Loga. L-o-g-a. First name Luc with a 'c', middle name William." Susan softly suggested and Steve's eyes went wide. Billy's name hadn't always been Hargrove? What did that mean?

Hoppers eyes went dark like he had just realized something vital to a case.

"Try Loga L-o-g-a, Luc with a c, middle name William. Same birthdate."

"Loga. Luc Loga...got it. Erm, his records are sealed pending to be expunged by the California Juvenile Court when he turns eighteen. No dice, Deputy Chopper." Carol clipped out.

"Sealed?!" Hop was so confused he didn't even care about Carol saying his name wrong.

Shuffle.

"—Luc Loga? That kid isn't *dead*?! That pain-in-the-ass was one Detective Freenan's and Xi's *Seven Snoops*, Carol. Why are you looking Freeman's kid up? *She* sealed his file. After what happened to Freeman, Xi forced us to cease using *those* seven kids as inform—" A man's voice cut in the background. Of course Billy would be infamous at a *police station* for being a *pain-in-the-ass*.

"Alright, I get it Barnsley." Carol responded, sounding embarrassed.

"I think I got what's going on here." Hopper's eyes sparked to life, thinking. "Look, forget the rap sheet, can you just send me a mug shot? He's missing and we just need a photo to circulate to bring him home."

"Isn't that what photo albums are for?" Carol asked skeptically.

"*Tell* me about it." Hopper sighed deep, purposely avoiding eye contact with Max and Susan.

A male and female murmured, Carol and Barnsley.

"Look, *officially* I can't give you sand in a desert. *Off* the record, *if* you were to call this number, 213-555-7448, and talk to a retired second class detective, Jerry Xi, he *knows* him, he might help you out." Carol sounded weary.

"Jerry She? S-h-e?" Hop began to furiously scribble.

"Xi with an X-I, guess you don't have any Chinese out that way. Remember, *officially*, I didn't say anything. Bye, Deputy." Carol hung

up as if already regretting her decision.

Hopper hung up the phone with a finger and Steve smell the smoke from Hopper's brain.

"Loga. Adopted?" El asked, almost hopeful. Maybe she hoped she wasn't the only one.

"No, Neil changed Billy's name legally when we moved out here. Loga was his mother's last name. Neil didn't even know he *had* a son until he got back from his third tour and, well, social services showed up with him one day almost two years ago." Susan admitted, and Max gave her a hug. Steve crossed his arms. He bet there was more to it than just that, and Hopper looked like he agreed.

But it really wasn't any of his business. Really.

"That detective said his files were sealed. You have to jump through some serious hoops to get juvenile records sealed, and more to expunge them in California." Vivian Sinclair spoke up. "My younger sister, Marion, was a real hellion when we were kids. Still is a bit. She couldn't get her record sealed or expunged and *damn* we tried. It's a good thing you did that for Billy, Susan." Vivian laced her fingers on the table with a tight smile.

"Aunt Marion in Oakland?! The one that Erica goes to and visits every summer used to be a *criminal*?!" Lucas' eyes got big. Vivian nodded simply. So, Erica and Billy both spent time in California. At least they had something in common besides Neil trying to kill them. Steve thumbed the necklace in his pocket.

"We didn't. I don't know anything about that, it must have been that woman detective who did that." Susan admitted and Vivian Sinclair leaned back and looked at her husband.

"We can gossip about Luc Billy Loga Hargrove *later*." Hopper spoke up like he knew something. Steve wished he picked up what Hopper figured out.

Steve tapped his foot, irritated. Everyone here was digging into Billy's life like it was a mystery to solve. Didn't they get that prying into

Billy's past was the last thing he would want? It would be the last thing Steve would want. He'd never want people here in Hawkins to know about Wilton, and what happened with Davie.

"Weeeiii Ni haaaaao." A girl answered, voice slurred. Was this Chinese?

"Um. *Hello*, I'm trying to reach *detective*, po-lice-man Jerry Xi. I'm chief Jim *Hop-per* with *Hawkins*, In-di-ana police—" Hopper spoke like his father did to his golf-caddies who had even a slip of an accent.

"I can speak English too, cop, I'm not stupid. Look, Jerry is re-*ti*-red." The girl mimicked Hopper condescendingly. "The 77th precinct's number is... Sang Hoon, stop!" The girl on the other end suggestively giggled. Steve lifted an eyebrow and caught Nancy's eyes. He had definitely made her giggle like *that* before.

Max's face lit up in recognition of something else though.

"Fine, bilingual brainiac, I'm short on time. The precinct told me to call him at this number about a case. The faster you can hand him the phone, the faster you and your little boyfriend can go back to your *extra-curricular* activities." Hopper steamed up. Steve bit out a quiet laugh as did Jonathan. Nancy even managed a smile.

"Any pig who wants to talk to Jerry goes through me first." Her voice turned from feathers to steel. "I told those worthless cops to leave Jerry be! What case is this?"

"I am not going to discuss the details of this with you, this is a poli..." Max gestured wildly with her hands and mouthed: "Tell her!" "Say his name, now!"

Steve eyed Max, she was definitely hiding a lot about Billy.

"It's in regards to a Billy Har—Loga. Luc William Loga."

Silence. Then two voices furiously chatted back and forth in a different language. Steve didn't understand a word, but after listening to the girl, he knew she'd win the argument. Next came a muffled "My house, My phone!"

Girls like her and Nance didn't lose arguments.

"You said Hawkins right? Spelled like the bird? And Indiana? Like Indiana Jones?" Her words now rushed over the phone. Worried?

"Yeah." Hopper relaxed a bit.

"Jim Hopper, right?" The girl insisted and Steve was impressed she got his name and place right when she was clearly *distracted* before.

"Yes, look I ge—" the line went dead.

"Damnit to hell. Max, who was that on the phone? I am TIRED of all this secrecy around your damn step-brother." Hopper slammed the phone down.

"That was this crazy Chinese *bitch*, Mei, and her *crazier* Korean boyfriend, Sang Hoon. Billy treated those dipshits like siblings. Billy would do drugs and other illegal stuff with them. I met Mei a few times. I think Billy thought we'd get along but we *didn't*!" Max admitted; eyes glacial. Steve didn't have to be a psychic to tell there was *history* there.

"Max, were they there *that* day?" Susan led and Max just curtly nodded. Steve had a lot of questions, and didn't like it.

"This doesn't make any sense. Why were they at this detective's house if they're criminals?!" Nancy piped up and it didn't make any sense to Steve either, especially with how protective Mei was being.

"Max, we are going to call them back and—"

The phone rang.

"Chief of Police, Jim Hopper." Hop picked up, phone on speaker.

"This is a collect call from Los Angeles, California, would you like to accept the charges?"

"Goddamnit. Sure." Hopper chuckled to himself, sounding impressed. "That girl is a brainiac. She just used outbound verification on me." Was she protecting the detective or Billy? Both?

"Hey there *Brain*, this is THE chief of Hawkins police, Jim Hopper." Hopper sounded a touch smug.

"You don't get to boast for being who you say you are. I have two questions for you first." Mei led; her voice dark and quick. Scheming. Steve began to have a weird sense of déjà-vu (or maybe that wasn't the right word for this feeling either).

It oddly reminded him of *himself* when he got revenge against Bart.

After he rallied the basketball team, Steve got a permanent marker and ducked inside the girl's bathroom when Elizabeth (the girl who gave him the most notes) gave him the 'all clear' sign. Steve knew he couldn't beat up Bart, and he knew that Davie would NEVER snitch. But, Steve wouldn't let Bart get away with it. He was definitely going to make him pay, but in the smart, grown-up way.

Steve thought for a moment and then scribbled a sentence in what he hoped looked like 'big kid' handwriting across the mirror. He wrote the most genius thing he could think of to get Bart in BIG trouble.

'Steve Harrington is a stupid pussy.'

Steve didn't really know what a pussy was, but he knew that it meant coward and it was *bad*. He wrote one more insult on the other mirror, remembering phrases his father once used against a business partner over the taxes.

'Steve Harrington smells like shit and eats it too.'

Steve told the rest of the basketball team and Elizabeth, to spread the rumor that they all saw Bart come out of the girl's bathroom with the marker.

No one believed Bart when he said he didn't write it because *everyone* heard what he yelled across the quad. Steve also suspected that his teachers didn't expect him to be *that* clever. His report cards said his 'performance is borderline satisfactory' which Steve knew really meant 'Your kid's pretty stupid' but they couldn't actually write that.

When headmaster Lewis asked Steve if it was true that Bart wrote it, Steve kept his cool, tapped his foot, and responded:

"*I thought dogs only went around smelling people.*"

And with that, Steve completely dethroned Bart. King Steve wore the Sailing Club crown proudly and won the respect of the basketball and baseball team too. Bart transferred schools because only 'Bark' echoed down the mahogany and marble halls, and never his *actual* name. Davie thanked him by taking him with him on vacation every Memorial Day weekend to go sailing.

"Fair enough, fine but make it quick. We are on the clock." Hopper clipped out. Steve knew Hopper hated being told what to do. Yet, Hopper was giving Mei a lot of rope, being really patient like he was with Joyce. He really sucked with women.

"How badly hurt is Loga?" Mei kept it short and sweet.

"He got roughed up, but we don't know how badly because we can't *find* him." Hopper returned short and sweet.

A string of words clipped out that Steve assumed were Chinese curses.

"What kind of trouble is he in?" Mei asked and in the background he heard Sang Hoon say something like the word 'Paya' or maybe 'Baya'.

"We think he got uh... kidnapped. Taken. You're a friend of his right? I'm not dense. We need help finding him and a girl who were taken by the same people. I just need a photo of him before...well it's too late. It might be already." Hopper gritted out, fisting and unfisting his hand.

"Taken by bad people? Like a gang? The Crips don't take people, and my brother isn't dead. We would *know*." Mei, leery as a stray cat, was beginning to catch on that Hop wasn't being completely truthful. But, how would they know if he was *dead* or not? She stated it with *attitude*.

"It wasn't a gang...we think that it could have been..." Hopper shifted his eyes over between Vivian and Max. "Sex traffickers." Hopper winced as he said it but Vivian and Max didn't.

"Ayyyoooo, Liar, liar police car on fire. Loga's too old for the kiddie

trade, and too smart to be turned out." Mei's voice took on a dark turn. Hopper scrutinized the Phone. Mei's mind, like Nancy's, could cut though bullshit easy.

"I can't give you any more details of this investigation." Hopper chipped into the phone

"I know when a pig is trying to use me get info for their *own* personal gain, this isn't new to me. I'm going to find where this Hawkins is and—" Mei's voice cut out.

"Shut up, you can't threaten any *more* cops!" Sang Hoon tersely whispered. More?! Max was right; she definitely had a short fuse.

Vivian Sinclair cleared her throat.

"My little girl, Erica, is ten years old. She and your friend were taken by *monsters*. Please, we really need your help." Vivian Sinclair's voice sounded like Billy's did when he told him to wait on Friday.

"I am on the speakerphone." Mei said, and Sang Hoon in the background interjected. "It's speakerphone, not *the* speakerphone. Are you sure you know English?"

Steve rolled his eyes as they bickered again in probably both languages. They were worse than he and Stacy that dated freshman year when they argued over who got to choose the music in his car, the driver, or to alternate songs. Driver. Duh.

"Hey, Mei, bicker with your boyfriend later. We have a little girl to find, and your *brother* might be the only hope she has." Hopper raised his voice.

Pause.

"How do you know my name?!" Mei's voice was a high shriek.

Hopper winced. Hopper screwed up.

"No one knows....Oh, oh, *oh*! If the little girl's family is there, then Loga's new sister, Max, is too." Mei paused. "She probably told you all *sorts* of things and...I get it! Loga's NOTHING to you but a *bastard*!

You all only care about the little girl! YOU DON'T CARE ABOUT GETTING HIM BACK!" Mei screamed venomously, voice cracking. Steve's chest cracked open a little, because hidden in her fury was anxiety he felt too.

"I care." Steve announced like a thunderclap.

All eyes in the room crystallized on him and he didn't care about any of the looks anyone gave him because it was true. He *did* care. *No one* deserved to be stuck in the Upside-Down, not even Billy, the prick who beat his face in.

"Who are you? *Prove* it." Mei's voice still cracked.

Steve could see where Billy got being so *difficult* from.

"Steve Harrington, and uh, we're on the same basketball team. He makes my life *hell*, but he is in serious trouble." Steve found his rhythm. He knew better than to lie to her. Hopper gave him a thumbs-up.

A burbling or bubbling of something came through over the phone.

"Herring. Like the fish." Mei had calmed down significantly. Like the *what*? "Fish are auspicious animals...." Mei mused, voice stifled and high. Steve had no idea what to do with that information. "OK, I will talk to you, only you Herring-tin."

"Whatever gets your engine going." Steve served back some attitude.

Shuffle.

"Hey, Fishface, don't flirt with my girlfriend. So, who gets smeared on the court, you or Loga?" Sang Hoon's voice came though high and slightly breathless over the phone. *Fishface*? REALLY? Was he ever going to catch a break?!

Lucas stifled a laugh, so did Max and Nancy. *Great*.

Another bubbling of something... were they taking *bong rips*?! Steve met Jonathan's eyes and they came to the same conclusion. Who *were* these people? They just told them their friend, *brother*, was missing

and they were getting *ripped*?

"Me." Steve sighed, might as well answer truthfully. "He makes it a point to smear *me* in particular, he's an ass. Always telling me, and only me, to 'plant my feet' and—"

An explosion of Chinese, Korean, and coughing cut off Steve. The languages sounded a little different now that Steve listened.

"Herring-tin, Loga tells you, and only you, to 'plant your feet'?!" Mei echoed sounding oddly excited. What did that have to do with *anything*? "Oooh, you are *good* friends then!" Mei's voice carried that high wheeze still from after her bong rip, but also suggested she knew something he didn't. 'Per usual, Harrington, you're left out of some weird inside joke.' He thought of all the ones the Dustin and the others said behind his back.

"If that's what you call being friends, I think I'll pass on all of California." Steve attempted humor and this time another burble.

Shuffle.

"Loga is family, *Herring-tin*." Mei called from the background. "He has *two* families." Max sat up a little straighter, as if about to bite something out when Hopper made the cut motion with his flat hand.

"So, how's this, Fishstick, I'll send some photos that Loga left with us for safe keeping." Sang Hoon whistled out a long breath. "Loga is such a *sap*!"

"Billy's a sap? You're the one calling me pet names, and we haven't even been on one date." Steve retorted, in which dimension was Billy a *sap*?! Not this one and probably not the Upside-Down either.

Earnest laughter from the other end.

"You're not too bad Fishfood. I can see why you and... guess now, Billy, are *good friends*. Mei wants to ask you something stupid. Humor her, for *your* sake." Sang Hoon's didn't sound like such a bad guy. Wait, what did he just think?

This whole conversation was probably more surreal than the Upside-

Down. Two of Billy's old stoner buddies thought he and Billy shared lunches and swapped chemistry notes, when all Billy did was beat the piss out of him and drive him up a fucking *wall*. Steve tried to muster an ember of indignation like he did Friday night, but none came. Steve really just needed a nap, and to make everyone swear they didn't call him *Fishface*.

Shuffle.

They squabbled in both languages. AGAIN. How did Billy get along with these guys if they didn't speak English to each other?

"Herring-tin. We need the police fax machine number." Mei was back on and he heard something that sounded like a slap and a giggle.

Hopper scrambled to the fax machine and found the paper and recited the number to the phone.

"Mmmm that wasn't Herring-tin... but I'll allow it. Herring-tin, what are you good at besides basketball? Impress me." OK, that was *not* the question he thought he was going to get. He thought she was going to ask him questions that *mattered* about Billy or what the *fuck* was going on. He wasn't really used to people asking him questions about himself.

"Seriously?" Steve answered. Sang Hoon wasn't wrong, how did he get himself into these fucked-up situations?

"Tick Tock, Herring-tin." Mei clicked her tongue.

'I guess she is being serious. I am going to punch Billy in the mouth for dealing with Mei's interrogation.' Steve sighed.

"Uh... honestly not much. Babysitting. I'm a good babysitter." Steve wanted to punch *himself* in the *mouth*. He had to come up with something more thrilling than *that*. He wasn't really good at cars, yet.

"and I'm...good at tying knots. I can sail a boat pretty well." Steve rambled and scratched the back of his neck. That was the best he got which was pretty pathetic. God, he really was a joke.

Wait, he couldn't really *care* about impressing Billy's stoned, crazy,

criminal friends, could he?!

Nancy tilted his head at him. He hadn't shared his time at Wilton with Nancy, much less anyone else except a little with Tommy and Carol. After all, it ended on a really bad note.

"You're a babysitter and a boat driver—"

"Sailor! God, Mei your English is SHIT." Sang Hoon yelled. More bickering. They were worse than his parents. "Remember that one Kwanzaa at Antoine's place where Marcus left his little sis with Loga and she drew on the TV screen while they watching-" Sang Hoon abruptly stopped.

"Kwanzaa?" Vivian Sinclair exclaimed in extreme confusion. Steve knew he had heard the word 'Kwanzaa' before but couldn't place it. Nancy across the room also furrowed her eyebrows, she probably knew.

"Sang Hoon you said that in *English* you Sha bi!" Steve had no idea that the last word was, but it probably wasn't a compliment.

Lucas sprung to his feet so suddenly it reminded Steve of a jack-in-the-box. Lucas did sort of have a big head...

"My sister is getting eaten by monsters and you guys are messing around! And I got my own questions! You guys say you're his crazy criminal family or whatever so answer me. He's big and strong, but also scary and psycho. Will he help protect my little sister or not?!" Lucas backhanded air as he shouted at the phone.

"Are *you* messing around? He is less than one hundred seventy six centimeters tall and even Sang Hoon can punch harder—" Mei was cut off by Sang Hoon sounding far away, "—Kicks. Remember he broke that banger's jaw with just *one* kick." Steve's mind flashed to the star shaped chip on his windshield. Maybe Billy should have tried out for soccer.

Steve subconsciously touched his face. At least Billy didn't kick him, a broken jaw would have been a *real* treat.

"Loga is too impulsive and aggressive for his own good, he always

needed *the protecting*. Reckless Sha bi." Mei reinforced with a word that Steve now knew had to be a good insult if she used it against Billy. Unease seeped into Steve's gut, Billy wouldn't actually *provoke* the demodogs, would he?

"My little sister is doomed. I knew it." Lucas put his head in his hands.

Mei tsked into the phone.

"Loga will pick a fight with almost anyone, which means if anyone is *doomed*, it's *him*. Herring-tin, these *monsters*, explain them." Mei's voice hardened to a steel edge again.

There was no way she'd believe the truth, but they had tried everything else...so here went nothing.

Hopper gave the nod.

"They're real monsters, with teeth and claws and live on the other side of a gate." Lucas and Max motioned to the lights and made fire motions with their hands.

Ok, he got it, he wasn't *slow*.

"They like the cold and dark, and hate fire and light..." Nancy made a wave motion with her hand.

He was just about to get to that. Jesus, everyone thought he was fucking *simple*.

"and they stay away from water." Steve hoped the phone wasn't still tapped by the government. Hopper didn't make any more to stop him.

"Mmmm, So Yaoguai, Demons, like from Journey to the West." What? Was she so stoned she actually believed him? "It is a good thing Loga is so fiery then. It is also good he has you, the fish, you know *water*, as a friend. In another famous Chinese tale, there is a brave fish that swims upstream through a gate other fish are too scared to pass through. His determination is rewarded and he transforms into a mighty, golden dragon." Super, this chick was more baked than an

apple pie; she was talking like all the other kids did about Dungeons and Dragons.

Exhaustion settled in his bones, Billy and Erica could be running for their lives and he was stuck placating Billy's stoner friends.

Per usual, Billy Hargrove had literally fucked his life sideways. Steve was going to kick his ASS.

"Sounds like someone swallowed some bong water." Steve found a kernel of sarcasm. She had to be fucking with him.

"Fuck off, that prick cop upset her and she needed to calm down. Plus, *she believes* you even though I don't, Fishnets. She and Javier are into all that superstitious shit. Don't even get me started with Bayani." Sang Hoon defended. Damnit, *Fishnets*?! "Special Delivery, coming in hot!"

"Finally." Hopper sighed heavily.

"We have to make another call, now. Call us when you find him, Herring-tin! Bye sailor boy!" Mei cooed.

Steve hated his life.

Hopper cursed as he had to pick up the charge for the collect call.

"See. I told you, they're crazy." Max huffed as the fax machine went off.

"Not crazy. Different. Like *sister*." El peered at Max ominously. Steve could never figure out why El didn't warm up to Max. He thought they'd get along. Apparently, though, Billy thought the same with Max and Mei, maybe they didn't know Max as well as they should.

The fax chirped and Steve for once, actually wanted to look at the message.

Everyone crowded around it like a basketball huddle.

"This better had been worth it." Lucas muttered as Hop picked up the first page. One of three.

The black and white faxed photo was of ...Billy and his mom?

A much younger Billy, maybe a little younger than Erica, sat next his mom on some busted up cement steps. His curly blonde hair reached his collar bone. Even in black and white, Billy's skin glowed much more tan than Steve had ever seen it. A worn out Lakers T-shirt too sizes too big (hand-me-down?) drowned his thin frame.

It was obscene thinking Billy could be so *young*, and look so *little*.

Both Billy and his mother had their tongues stuck out at the camera, and not in the cutesy way girls do to keep their eyes big. They squinted their faces up all goofy, like they were making fun of the person behind the camera.

Steve's mother wouldn't be caught *dead* making that sort of face at a camera, let alone let the film get *developed* and *saved*. All the photos in his house were carefully chosen portraits or required a tripod.

Billy's mom was also holding some white book with some moon on it and a French title. She had on a ruffy dress, the same silver necklace he had in his pocket, and....

Hold the *phone*.

Now, Steve *knew* he wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, and the photo was in black and white, but this woman was...really *really* tan. Like...maybe 'not all the way white' *tan* (was that wrong to think, or even the right term?). She had billowing, curly, sorta dark hair (way more curly than Nancy's), a button nose, and full lips. Her eyes though, were like Billy's, light and bright.

'*I'm not the racist!*'

There was NO way....

Howard Sinclair pointed to Billy's mother.

"Mixed raced people can still have light colored eyes. It's more common than you might think. It could explain Kwanzaa. It's a holiday started to celebrate African culture." Eye expert Howard Sinclair finally decided to say something and he said THAT?

Did that really JUST happen?

"So *that's* how Billy gets the highest scores on French tests while skipping almost every class. That book she has is 'Le Petit Prince'." Nancy revealed and Steve balked. He had no idea Nancy and Billy were in the same AP French class, much less Billy *took* Advanced French. The only French Steve knew was from wine his mother bragged about.

"I only knew her name was Laurette Loga and that she was a...ahem, *dancer*." Susan's face had no blood in it. "Neil must not he must not have thought she was mixed... My *God*..." Well, that much was *obvious* Susan, thanks for the news update.

Max kept her lips pursed, not revealing anything. Max could be trusted with nuclear launch codes.

"Too young." El spoke up.

The second page fed though.

This one was one of a group of seven people, all young around Billy's signature z28 Camaro.

Seven Snoops...

An Asian girl with long dark hair, tall spindly high heeled shoes, shorts and a dark crop top poised herself just like Teri Peterson did on November cover of Playboy 1981(Steve wasn't creepy, it was one of his favorites). That had to be Mei. She could put almost all the Hawkins girls to shame with her body, especially her legs. She was blowing a kiss at the camera, lips dark.

Squatting beneath her on the pavement was another, toned Asian guy (had to be Sang Hoon) with a short Mohawk, studded vest, and baggy pants with some crazy pattern on them. Punk. He could make out either a scar or a tattoo on his neck. He had a cigarette in his hand and smiling bright, looking at guy on the far right in the photo.

Sang Hoon was looking at a tall, overweight black guy at the trunk. He hulked roughly as big as Hop, and had styled his hair into a big fluffy afro. He had on a Jiminy Hendrix T-shirt and a large, heavy

chain around his neck. In one hand he held a leash with a Doberman sitting alert beside him. The camera caught him in a full, hearty laugh.

Next to him, near the rear triangular window of the Camaro, stood a young guy so tall and *jacked* he could probably lift the Camaro. He looked Hispanic and had short, neat black hair and a crisp goatee, no mustache. and a giant cross pendant around his neck. He smiled proudly at the camera.

A guy who could have been a stunt double in Ranbo 'First Blood', perched himself in a handstand on top of the Camaro. His long braided hair fell down to the roof. The photo cut him off at the pecs but Steve could tell he was tan, and toned. Tribal tattoos ran jagged across his shoulder blades. His smile curled wildly upside down, lips dark like Mei's.

So *that's* where Billy got his crazy from.

In front of the driver's side door, were Billy and another guy, his arm slung snugly around Billy's shoulders.

The muscular black guy with his arm around Billy beamed down at him. The camera caught him mid-word, but even in the awkward facial expression he could tell he was handsome. He had a shorter afro than the guy on the far right and it had a flat top. He wore baggy pants, high top sneakers, no shirt (abs like washboard), and about a half dozen chains over his chest.

Billy looked back up at him too, his face slightly tilted back and up.

Billy looked about the same as he did in Hawkins, except for three distinct differences. One was that he was tanner like the first photo. Second, his hair tumbled all the way down to his collarbone, just like in the first picture. Third, necklaces and at least two pairs of earrings dangled from him, glinting like Fourth of July sparklers. Steve's mother would call all the jewelry gaudy, but Billy *wore* it all *well*.

Well, there was one *more* difference, the sunshine-bright smile that lit up his whole face. That smile turned his soft eyes into crescents and filled his cheeks out. Billy looked so... *happy*. At *ease*, nothing like he

was in Hawkins. Steve couldn't help but feel *cheated* a bit. Why couldn't he know *this* Billy?

Steve's pulse raced and something rare coiled in his stomach. He noticed a fourth difference. Billy had his right arm around the other guy's waist...like he and his girlfri...

Holy SHIT.

They were *together!*

Billy really *was* gay.

'If you're going to keep looking at my dick, might as well blow it, King Steve.'

"A picture is worth a thousand words." Jonathan murmured. No Shit. This was *awkward*.

"You're gawking, Steve." Nancy said. Steve hadn't realized his jaw dropped until he closed it.

"That's them, Mei and Sang Hoon." Max pointed. "The one on the far right with the dog is Marcus, the big one is Javier. I never met the crazy one on the roof but he must be Bayani. Billy's boyfriend was named Antoine. I think this was the day they bought the Camaro, I recognize Billy's outfit." Max continued, only sounding half annoyed.

"Huh, Billy is a shorty." Vivian Sinclair mused.

No one commented on the past tense 'was named'. Steve could only imagine. Didn't that police officer correct the seven to *six*?

"Bitchin'." El took the photo. Steve almost forgot why they got the photos in the first place.

The third page followed and while Hopper and the others stood to watch El at the table, Steve collected the last page.

The photo was of Billy, Sang Hoon, and Bayani, and three other unfortunate souls.

Steve's breath caught in his throat, this was the Billy he knew. He, Sang Hoon, and Bayani's glares *alone* could gut a shark and cook it.

Billy's feral, ravenous eyes had always intimidated him, but the grim, flat look in his eyes in this photo made Steve's blood pump in reverse.

Billy frowned deep, nostrils flared. Something dark, blood, ran down his forehead and seeped into his right eyebrow. He had a man who looked a lot larger than him in front of him, a sword-sized knife at the man's throat, chin up.

Next to him Sang Hoon's sneer could stop someone in freefall. He had a swollen eye and blood dripped out his nose. Steve could tell now that it was a burn scar across his neck, not a tattoo. He stood over his man, in his right hand he held a handgun at the base of another man's head. In his other hand he had a...staple gun? Huh?

Bayani, up close, sorta looked like this one kid from Thailand, Parvati, in the Sailing club at Wilton. His dark eyes reminded him of El's, and he smiled softly with dark lips even through a busted lip. He had a knife at his man's throat just like Billy had.

Steve didn't *get* his smile.

Deciphering this photo, the one of all of them in front of the z28, his mother, and the Billy he knew, was giving Steve a headache. Why did Sang Hoon send *these* photos? Was he trying to get them to know Billy better? The whole picture of Loga turned Hargrove?

Steve then studied the men they had by gun and knife-point.

A sign was stapled to each man's chest (chest not shirt, *christ*). Together they all read:

"Special delivery LAPD,"

"Justice served hot for"

"Det Jerry Xi and Det Maya Freeman"

Steve knew that these signs were about the same Jerry Xi Hop tried to talk to. Maya Freeman must be the woman detective who helped

Billy. The other guy at the police station with Carol also mentioned both the detectives were together. So, Jerry Xi and Maya Freeman had to have been partners.

Why had the records lady only given them Jerry Xi's number? Why didn't they give them Maya Freeman's number too? They should have if they said Billy was *her* kid, especially if she was the one who helped Billy seal his file!

And like the '*snick*' of a lighter, it all clicked again.

'After what happened to Freeman...'

Something *bad* happened to her, and to Jerry Xi too.

Maybe Jerry Xi didn't retire because of old age. Maybe he was forced into 'early retirement'. The same probably happened to Maya Freeman, and if they didn't get her phone number...maybe she was a 'was' like Antoine.

Just what in the *fuck* was Billy *into* in LA?

Steve, suddenly nauseous, wasn't sure if he wanted to know. This was *too much*. He just wanted this to be some sick, twisted nightmare like usual. He didn't want to know ANY this about Billy. He couldn't even PROCESS it.

Steve folded and pocketed the last page just in time for El to start shaking violently.

Immediately he swooped behind Lucas.

The air in the room noosed his throat. Steve thumbed Billy's pendant in his pocket. He hoped he wasn't developing a nervous habit.

"What's happening?!" Susan exclaimed and just as quickly as El shook, she stopped. Blood seeped from her ears and nose. Hopper had to hold her upright. As if her arm was weighted down, she weakly pointed to the photo of Erica.

No one dared to even breathe wrong.

"Ok. Not gone." El croaked out as she tapped Erica's face.

"Thank you Jesus. Thank you, don't worry baby, mama is coming for you." Vivian Sinclair's entire presence lit up and she picked up the photo and kissed it. Howard Sinclair held her tight.

"I knew she'd be fine." Lucas announced and Max rolled her eyes.

"Oh thank heaven! They're going to be alright." Susan collapsed back into her chair.

El hadn't smiled yet. Steve only caught it because he was the only one not celebrating, yet. She moved her trembling hand to the other photo, her finger hovering over Billy's chest.

El's deep eyes, now glassy and a bit bloodshot, locked onto Steve's. His lips parted to say something but he couldn't force air down his windpipe.

No. *Don't* say it.

He still had to kick Billy's ass for his friend calling him 'Fishface', *and* his windshield, *and* all snide comments he made about his *whole life* that Billy didn't even *know*! Not to mention, now Billy owed *him* answers, SO MANY answers about all this nonsense.

Steve's thumb rubbed over Billy's silver pendant furiously.

"Not OK." El leveled at Steve.

DAMNIT.

His pulse stopped.

Gravity stopped.

All of his organs shoved themselves up into the gluey base of his throat.

He still had to prove Billy *wrong*. Show him Steve Harrington wasn't shit in a fight. He wasn't a shit babysitter. He wasn't a useless 'Paper Knight' whatever that *really* meant. Steve Harrington protected the

people who needed it. He protected the people he cared about *damn* well. He wasn't...he couldn't be too little, too late again.

His hand has a death grip on Billy's mother's necklace that he still had to give back to Billy.

"Tick tock, Almost gone." El mimicked Mei and took her hand and fisted it to her stomach, and opened it. Her fingers lifted up, spreading out. Blood. Then her fingers danced. Fire.

Max bolted from the room out the front door, chair toppling over to smack the floor with a bang. Susan called out something, maybe someone else too, but they didn't register in the storm of his mind.

'Go die in a fire, Hargrove, and leave Max, Lucas, and the rest of us alone.' Steve didn't actually mean it. Well he did, but not LITERALLY! It was *just* an expression.

He remembered the 'snick' of the lighter, and the way Billy *gave up*.

'Yeah...*might just happen that way*.' Billy hadn't looked at Steve when he said it. That dumbass looked away as if he thought that was what Steve *really* and *literally* wanted. It was just a FUCKING expression!

How could Billy let this happen?! Did he give up?!

No, Mei had pegged Billy as *reckless*, not suicidal. Billy would NEVER give up. He just screwed up.

Screwed up BIG.

Steve's dormant anger boiled and flared into his throat, drying it out.

All that stupid 'Shabi' Billy had to do was hold his own for a few hours, but NO! He just had to get himself *gutted* by some Demi-whatever! Now Steve had to *track* him down, *clean* up his mess, and *drag* him home to KILL him for all trouble he put him through.

He was going to make Billy 'sloppy-as-fuck' 'two-stupid-last-names', PAY.

"Where is he, Billy?" The unflappable King Steve's calmly asked,

storing his anger for Billy.

Billy nude, laughing, eyes bright in all that dancing fire.

"Hospital." At least Billy fucked up somewhere convenient.

Notes:

OK. So. Bear with me. It's a lot. I know. It's supposed to be a lot. You're not supposed to get his backstory yet. Either of theirs.

I honestly have a plan a really really good one. Bear with me.

I understand if Billy's mom being mixed race is problematic. (she is at least half caucasian) I expect to get a lot of hate/flames from it but I really wanted to try my hand at representing mixed race people, and well I'm not going to change my mind. But, if you notice anything offensive please let me know because I want to be as respectful as possible obviously.

Also, keep in mind that I am trying to write all these characters as pretty flawed.

Steve isn't really angry or blaming Billy for getting hurt, he just doesn't process guilt well (as seen in the show), and is guilty of putting people on pedestals to some degree. He and Max both think that Billy is the toughest thing ever (which is proven false with the photos and getting to know who he was) and that if anyone could be fine in the upside down, it'd be Billy. So when that vision of Billy being more force of nature, rather than human is shattered, Steve has a problem with processing it and get angry, but we will soon see how Steve really feels once he calms down.

Steve is also being pretty manipulative to get what he wants, and doesn't always think clearly (he definitely should have told hop in the first chapter). Steve in the show is seen as a pretty emotionally aloof (except with Nancy) selfish guy turned more selfless. This is more a blend of confident King Steve, and selfless 'less of a dick' Steve hence "King Steve: cover album" Also, later you'll see how Steve went from being pretty passive about fighting and fist fights, to being more

assertive (a la wanting to murder Neil) as a child in his backstory.

also remember, most of the characters are teenagers. their decision making skills aren't fully developed yet :P

Mei is smart, cares deeply for people, and protective, but she is easily worked up, uses weed as a crutch for her anxiety, and prioritizes gossip about Billy having a crush over getting them photos (but even she doesn't understand the urgency, she thinks that whatever it is, it's not as serious as dangerous as growing up in south central LA).

Sang Hoon doesn't believe anything Hop and Steve have to say about monsters or Billy being 'missing' (that's what he and Mei are bickering about actually [not couples stuff]. He thinks it's all lies and she is trying to get more information) and thinks the photos are a joke so he sends them ones he wants them to see. Sang Hoon has his own opinions for what he REALLY thinks is going on, that are hidden for now, along with what he wants to do about it.

Vivian Sinclair is having some issues as well, blaming Susan for things way beyond her control and not being more of a mother figure for Billy, who as we can tell is super difficult. Vivian doesn't really understand their family dynamic and unfairly goes after Susan. Vivian is used to being the responsible mother who looks after two children and projects that onto Susan unfairly.

Susan is an unstable mess with very low self esteem after being in a somewhat emotionally draining and abusive marriage, who finds it easier to defend others (especially her abuser) rather than herself, except when it comes to Billy. Susan is understandably a wreck, but she can't rectify her husband being murdered by monsters and defending who he was when he wasn't mentally ill.

Max has her reasons for being so pent up with Billy. Billy obviously hasn't always been nice to her, and vice versa. You'll see why Max and Mei don't get along later and how much exactly Max knows, and why she has the opinions she has. Something happened in LA that caused their relationship to sour. Though we will soon see what Max really thinks about Billy and him being trapped in the upside down.

El is still being unfairly mean to Max. I haven't reconciled their

friendship yet. El likes Billy's friends because they remind her of Kali's crew (as they are supposed to, they're supposed to be sort of the same, but more grounded in reality)

Also this fic will take on a lot more mythology, superstitions, and symbolism than Dungeons and Dragons. The Chinese myths and stories and the Colombian myths and stories I am using are all accurate and real (this is why El says different, not crazy).

Symbolism is everything in this fic, so be on the look out. (for example, Steve 'fish' crossing into the gate, some variation of transformation 'into dragon' may happen to his character)

Also, get ready for some craziness. I'm going to bread crumb it a bit, but the Upside Down is deadlier than ever, and they are going to need more than El's powers to stop it.

4. A First Cut

The Paper Knight and the Killing Tree

Chapter Four: A First Cut

Those dumbshit movies that showed some idiot getting stabbed and bleeding out in seconds, or vomiting a Colt 45's worth of blood were FUCKING WRONG.

It could take hours. Maybe a day. Maybe *fuck all* would happen.

The first time Billy had gotten stabbed, in his opinion, wasn't much to write home about.

He had skipped his third consecutive day of seventh grade to meet up with Sang Hoon, Marcus, and Javier to score. The deal went south, and it could've ended up a lot worse if Baya hadn't had one of his *voice-visions* and showed up to and even the odds. Billy got stabbed in the shoulder by a Mexican dickbag with a gold tooth, but he definitely won the fight when he roundhouse kicked him and knocked that gold tooth *out*. It wasn't even that deep, but everyone give him total *shit* for it. Baya, Javier, and Marcus all hovered over him like mother fucking hens.

Oh, and the fourth degree he got from his own Maman...she didn't let him out of her sight for *two weeks*. No damn exaggeration. She dragged him to school and back, and even had the school make sure he wasn't truant. He even had to go with her to *each* of her jobs. Having to wait in the back room of the club while his mom danced for limp-dicked Johns definitely drove home the point: 'don't get *stabbed* again anytime soon'.

The second time he got stabbed was far more of a *shitheel* of a time even though his maman wasn't alive anymore to read him the riot act. That was that time with Mei, Max, and the whole Mexican fucking *standoff*.

They came out on top in the end, when Baya again showed up like fucking clockwork. Sang Hoon, Baya and himself got roughed up, but

it was WORTH it hunting them down. Bayani claimed he finally got a 'usable vision' that found the goons that *iced* Maya and made a *cripple* of Jerry. Bayani made him and Sang Hoon PROMISE they wouldn't skin the three of them and fillet them like Marcus' mother's Kwanzaa roast if he told them where to find them. Bayani could be such a buzz kill (that's older brothers for you), but Maya and Jerry wouldn't have wanted him and Sang Hoon slaughter them either.

If it was any other cops, Billy wouldn't have given a damn, but they were FAMILY and he OWED them. Billy paid a debt where debt was due.

Billy's pulse fluttered weakly in his ears. He winced hard looking at the half-decent, dark red bandage Little Hickshit wrapped for him. The hole still bled sluggishly.

This would be the last fuck-up for Loga: getting skewered through like a Turkish shish kebab by some rapey tree monster from the Evil Dead.

His fucking clock was punched. *KO*.

His right shoulder ached like a BITCH (classic sign of hemorrhaging blood loss). He was also just too damn weak, too damn cold, too damn fucking...Irréfléchi (thoughtless). Too damn...wu neng (incompetent).

Too damn fucking DIZZY.

Billy's vision blacked around the edges and he allowed himself to fall backwards and collapse lopsided down the ashy wall of the ER. His fires had burned themselves to embers and stopped their weird dancing.

'Go die in a fire Hargrove, and leave Max, Lucas, and the rest of us alone.' Harrington would get exactly what he wanted.

Billy had already resigned himself to kicking the bucket in this festering shit hole, but that didn't mean *what he knew* had to die here too.

If someone had told him yesterday that'd he'd trust Sinclair's kid

sister with something THIS important he would have kicked their tonsils into their lungs. *Hell*, if anyone had told him that he would think of her as a *comrade* he would have used their arm for an ashtray.

Maybe there was a god laughing at him from his high horse that the only person he actually TRUSTED in that shitcreek town was a Girl Scout half his age.

He really *had* lost his edge.

"Big cityshit, get up! You already napped once!" He kinda heard Erica, her voice sounded like it was bouncing and echoing in his head. She got all up in his blurred vision. He didn't get how he could be so sweaty, and so cold at the same.

He couldn't blame Little Hickshit, he'd been motoring like a man on fire, save the quick nap, for a solid...four...five hours now? She probably didn't get that he was Samang. Mourant. (dying).

Billy grimaced as lolled his head up to meet hers, she was standing over him with her hands on her hips like he decided to just fuck off and take a siesta. Her trembling gave her worry away.

Goddamnit.

"This isn't a nap. This is the long deal, Little Hickshit." Billy sighed out. At least he managed to scorch the last of those El Caimans. Billy could sort of make out the charred remains of one of those human looking Cujos on the hospital floor. His knife lay in a pool of monster goo. "Grab the knife. Salgas(leave)." He ordered but she didn't move.

"Girl Scout has the hammer and the flashlight. He Man has the knife and fire. You go get it, I'll even help you up." She could be such a *stubborn* little bitch when it suited her. Fine. Leave a perfectly good weapon to get dull. Stupid broad. Tanga (idiot).

Billy got that she was just trying keep him moving. It...just wasn't going to work though. He could barely catch his breath. Once your breathing got shallow like this....it was six feet under o'clock.

He tried to reply...but a hack and a bloody wheeze erupted from his

mouth instead. The filter of a fully spent cigarette finally tumbled from his lips and hit the floor in front of him.

"Cooooomme on, You're gonna get up. We're gonna get Greyskull, and we are gonna get *ourselves* outta here because I don't trust that freak Carrie girl *at all*." Heh. That psychic girl with the bad makeup reminded him more of Danny from the Shining. Erica tried again, this time taking his shoulders and shaking him a bit. Billy didn't have the energy to shake her off of him, which was a *really* bad omen because she wasn't even trying worth a damn.

"Stop. Arrête. zhùshǒu! Fucking stop!" that made Little Hickshit stop shaking him. "Don't trust Danny from the damn *Shining* with your secret, being spe—"

"OUR secret. Yeah I get it, '*Being special isn't good, it's a pain-in-the-ass, so don't say shit.*' You don't gotta be a broken record like my teacher Mrs. Saunders. I got it the *first* time." Little Hickshit mocked him. Was this really his life? Dying in a fucking three-mile-island hospital getting mocked by a Girl Scout, he was a real badass.

"You suck at impressions, and I'm nothing like your fat *laoshi*." He didn't have the energy to really stop her from doing what she wanted anyway. "BUT. From what you told me about your mom, and from what I know about Steve 'white knight' Harrington, if they think they can get you out of here, they *will*." Billy's teeth chattered together. Freezing.

"I don't know if I want them to come or not...I do know that I want you to get better and take me to see Nightmare on Elm Street. You owe me." Erica frowned and crossed her arms.

"I don't owe you shit...but, if i wound up with an extra ticket, *maybe* I'd take you." Billy's hand shook as he dipped his left hand in the monster goop. He already lost all feeling in his right hand, and his left was almost as fucking useless. Shakily and slowly he scrawled out a phone number he had long ago branded into his brain. Little Hickshit scrunched her face at the goop, slick combo of his own blood and the Caiman they savaged earlier. Asqueroso (nasty)!

"Wha—" she looked down at the 213-555-7448

"Listen close, Little Hickshit." He fought a shiver, though he wasn't going to show it and bitch out even more than he already had. "When you get out of here... call that number. Tell whoever picks up, girl, guy, whoever. Tell them that it was Neil who *did* Ant. Tell the—" Billy coughed wet and hacked up some blood. Fuck internal bleeding.

"Bill—" Erica started but he put out a hand weakly.

"Erica LISTEN. You're the only one in this shit town who has, so keep it up, *please*." He could barely keep his eyes open, but he saw hers widen. "Tell them Neil killed Antoine Kabore. Tell them Hawkins, Indiana. Tell them about the signs Neil almost made *us* wear. Jerry will do the rest, he was a cop, *good* one. Don't say shit to that...Chief 'Ding Dong'." Lightheaded, Billy's head bobbed a bit. Little Hickshit lifted and held his head up. He appreciated the gesture though he'd rather chew glass than show it.

"OK partner. I'll call for you, but only if you wear the bracelet I make." His drooping eyes met her watery ones. She couldn't be crying over *him* could she? What the most absurd fucking NONSENSE was *this*?

Billy almost bit out to stop, that she didn't *know* him so she didn't get to CRY over him... but she *did* know him.

"Bien, mi amiga." *Dios mios*, Billy, could barely wrap his head around that the closest thing he had to a *friend* in Hawkins was a Girl Scout in grade school.

Erica Sinclair probably saw and knew more of the sane, REAL *him* than anyone else in Hawkins, save Max.

Max...maybe he should tell Erica to tell her 'sorry'?

Nah.

Like Max would want to hear it, give a shit, or believe Erica. Check *all* of the above. He scorched that bridge to *ruin*. Hell, Max could even be blaming him for her mother's husband kicking the bucket, even though that was a *fucking favor*. She'd probably hear that he died here from Girl-Danny from the Shining, and breathe a sigh of

relief.

He couldn't blame Max.

Hell, no one in Hawkins would miss a beat. *'The big bad wolf who will huff and puff and blow all our little pigshit houses down is dead! Let's have the lamest party ever, grab the damn fiddle and let's have a fucking ho-down.'* Que Soso (how lame).

"You're really giving up?" Little Hickshit asked thickly. Maybe he should give her back that purple hanky.

"Fuck off. If I wanted that, I'd have let the Poltergeist have me." He snarled.

"..."

"..."

"I can change your bandages again." Little Hickshit seemed real intent on *wasting* her damn time on him.

"Shi gan nang bi. Waste of time." He was. He was pagod, tired. Tired of everything and what did really have left anyway? Like Susan would keep him around. Like he could go back to LA like a stray mutt with its dirty tail between its legs. "Tired of this shit. I'm good. Well, I'm not *good*. You know, I'm a total fucking psycho. *Auténtico Psicópata*. Stephen King level of fucked in the head. This... fits, Little Hickshit. Just hideout, blind and tranq those Caimans and Cujo—" he stopped when she pinched him on the cheek.

Damn brassy tart.

"You're being a stupid *pendejo* again. Sure, you've done *bad*, but you've seen *worse*. So what if you get angry and really like slicing monsters up? You're really smart, and you still SAVED me when you didn't *have* to. I'll take you over those boring, goodie-two shoes heroes my egghead brother worships." Erica actually sounded like she meant all the horseshit that she just said.

"I didn't do shit. That goodie-two shoes Steve is gonna get you—"

"Again with that *Steve* guy, who cares...wait do you *like-like* him?! And you think they're only coming here for *me*, don't you?" Erica grinned like she KNEW a big secret but she was WRONG. But she didn't fucking get it. She didn't get that all those hicks either hated him or lusted after him, which he *liked*, but Steve definitely fell in the *former* category. She fisted her hand in the matted curls of his hair, but he didn't really feel it.

"Don't make me...." Billy swore he was about to finish strong when he yakked bile and blood across himself. Weak.

"Guess I can't hate you for hanging on as long as you could. I'm still angry at you, Big Cityshit, we're friends now and you're leaving me here ALONE." Little Hickshit's soft voice echoed around in his head. It struck him fucking odd that he'd be kicking the bucket with someone in Hawkins who DIDN'T hate his guts. Billy never saw it going down that way.

Everything began to slow down, murky icy and cold. The tingle of feeling shrunk up his right arm. He couldn't feel anything anymore and a small, sad smile crawled across his face. Finally, he could just LET GO.

She didn't let go though. She kept holding his head up, he could still feel her sticky, warm hands on the sides of his head.

"Not for long...Tranqs, got some?" Billy's voice was a raspy shadow of what it used to be, but Little Hickshit's rescue party would be here soon. He let his eyelids flutter closed.

He fulfilled his purpose.

He protected her from the threats foreign and domestic. He earned his reward to take it FUCKING EASY. It was enough, this life. He had some good times mixed in with the shit.

Sniff.

"Yeah."

Sniff.

"knife...." Billy could barely keep his voice above a whisper.

Sniff.

"You know, Billy, my Aunt Marion would totally like you....I'm gonna sing you something. Don't say anything. She'd give me *side-eye* if I didn't. My Uncle Josue, taught her this song before he...well *you know*. I only remember one part. And don't ask me what it means, but since it's kinda close to French. Maybe you'll get it." Erica's voice bubbled in his brain a bit. she was going to *sing for him*? And her Uncle?....oh yeah, that whacko voodoo priest from Haiti....

"Papaloko ou sé van. Pousé-n alé. Nou sé papiyon. Na pote nouvèl bay agoué." She couldn't carry a tune if you gave her a bucket, but neither could his Maman. The song...something about butterflies? Good news? Bad news? Wind? He didn't *get* it, but if it made her feel better then...fuck it...

This was...*nice*...

It reminded him of when he and his Maman would sit on the floor of their apartment and she'd hum while she brushed tangles out of his hair, and he'd tell her stuff like how Marcus taught him how to ride a bike, or how Bayani landed his first front flip. Or on his birthday when he was young she would always read him *Le Petit Prince*. They'd both wear those cheesy paper party hats, and eat chocolate Easter rabbits, peeps, and jelly beans for breakfast AND lunch. For dinner, Maman would always cook his favorite French dish, *Tartiflette* (couldn't go wrong with cheese and potatoes Ant would say) and Maman would put those little candles in Twinkies for a birthday cake.

Billy smiled and finally exhaled one last time to see nothing but a warm, cradling white light behind his eyelids.

five-ish hours ago

"I go visit my Aunt Marion in Oakland every summer for a month. I've been going since I was little and she'd take me to these protests and stuff. I saw a lot. I guess horror movies and stuff like that just

don't scare me. It's not like it's *real*." Little Hickshit finally explained how she got into horror flicks. It had taken Billy a lot longer than usual to hotwire the pickup. Billy guessed it was because of the fucking *ass-backwards* wonderland they were in. All that really mattered was he started it because he wasn't in good enough shape to walk all those miles to the hospital.

If they were going to fight these Cujos and whatever else came at them, he had to get fixed up.

He also had an *idea*.

"Oakland, huh. That explains your hot-shit attitude. That place is about as opposite from Hawkins as you can *get*." Billy furrowed his eyebrows in thought. "I bet you saw some real bad shit go down. I heard all about the shootings in South Central." Billy figured her Aunt probably protested in those Black Panther rallies.

They had been driving for a bit now, and everything was the same dingy shitty black. Like that old Stones' song, '*I see my red door and I want it painted black. No more colors anymore....I want them to turn black.*' Quite a damn literal interpretation.

At least in the pickup the fluff was kept outside, aside from the busted window.

"I don't have an attitude, I just know how *small* Hawkins is. My mom's family is from Oakland, my dad's is from Hawkins. My mom met my dad when he was at Oakland University, he's an ophthalmologist. They moved back here so my dad could take care of my grandparents." Little Hickshit babbled on. Damn, talk about a downgrade for Mrs. Sinclair. "And yeah, I saw *stuff* that I swore I'd keep secret...but I guess I can tell you, since you've seen *stuff* too. I saw my Uncle Josue die in Oakland, two years ago. My Aunt and I told my Mom that I didn't see anything, but I did. I *saw* his body." Erica fucking Sinclair just dropped a bomb on him. Shocked, Billy almost tore his eyes off the hell scape road he was gunning down.

"Gotta say Little Hickshit, wasn't expecting that." Billy didn't really know what to say. Maya used to say, 'Death happens everyday, but you don't get used to it.'

"He was all bloody and beat up when he came back to their apartment. It wasn't the first time it happened, but this time he fell asleep on the sofa and never woke up again. Aunt Marion said that he was jumped because people didn't like that he was from Haiti. My aunt moved to Haiti for a while and met Josue there, then they both moved back. Uncle Josue was super weird though. He would go around saying he was a vodou priest and could heal people. He and my aunt would sing traditional songs in his Creole language a lot. Sounds sorta like French." Little Hickshit rambled on, and Billy welcomed the distraction. Listening to her talk about her whack-a-doo family gave him something to do other than get into his own fucking head.

"Creoles can take all that religious stuff to the *next* level. Knew a guy with a family sorta like that, not from Haiti though. New Orleans. Voodoo creeps people out, it definitely didn't do your Uncle any good blabbing his fat mouth off about it." Billy put in his two cents before he realized what he had done. Were they having an actual conversation about damn *voodoo* of all things?

"Knew? Was it Ant?" Her innocent question spiked his blood and he saw RED. He whipped around to her, hand up, eyes set.

She flinched a bit. FUCK. He clamped his hand back down on the filthy steering wheel and turned his head back to the road so fast he saw spots.

He had no reason to get all bent out of shape because she didn't KNOW. Antoine's face flashed onto the smudged windshield, and it didn't sit well with Billy that he had begun to forget precisely what his face looked like all together. Il se souvenait ses yeux, sa bouche, son nez...

"Oui. Il ne s'en souciait pas. Cependant, sa famille le croyait." Billy answered, she better take the fucking peace offering or so help him... wait...THE FUCK HE JUST SAY?! God, his whole head must be short circuiting. Fuck this SHITHOLE!

"Oui is French....You speak French? What's pendejo in French? And that other bullhang word you said earlier?" Damnit. He really was just too damn careless. Well, fuck like it mattered anyway.

"Damn straight. You dished your dirt, I'll dish mine." Billy spat out like he *planned* it that way. "I said 'he didn't believe it, but his family did'. But pendejo is Spanish for asshole, it's not French at all. Bulhaeng is Korean for 'shit luck'. I speak those too." Billy bit out. He didn't like talking about himself, but he had a feeling that she would just pester him.

"You gotta learn all that in school in Los Angeles?" Little Hickshit sounded skeptical. Fuck she wasn't going to let this go. "No way, you're playing games with me."

"Games? How 'bout this for a game Little Hickshit, 'Two truths, one lie'. Guess the lie. One, my mother was from France. Two, I also know Mandarin and Tagalog. Three, I've shot people." Billy grinned, if Little Hickshit wanted to know him, it was gonna be on his terms. He also usually won this game.

"...Easy, last one. Your weirdo last name, Loga, it was probably hers right? My mom and my aunt had my grandmother's last name before they got married. Two, I don't even know what those languages are, but you said them too quick for them to be made them up. So, number three." Erica Sinclair was a sure sharp tart. He would have bet the bug-out money under the floorboards in his bedroom that every person in Hawkins would guess three was absolutely the black and white truth.

"Not bad Little Hickshi—" Something in the woods to his left caught the periphery of Billy's vision. He could have imagined it. He was trying his best to operate on Mei's level of paranoia and harness Baya's level of 'spirit vision', so he didn't think he imagined it.

Something was out there. Something FAST. Something BIG.

"Strap in." Billy floored it. He wasn't lying to Erica earlier about being the wheelman, he could maximize the potential out of any vehicle he sat behind. Neil's rustbucket-hillbilly mobile included.

"Another Cujo?" Little Hickshit asked, putting on her seatbelt. Neil's jacket was so fucking big on her it draped all over the seat, but if they had to bail it'd protect her well.

"No, the next guy up the food-chain. They're upping the game, bring it you ugly cunts." Billy lowered the gear of the pickup to third and the rpms went through the roof as the engine growled.

Billy whipped his head around to see *El Hombre Caiman*, fly from the forest and ram the driver's side of the bed of the pickup. The pickup bucked to the right and Little Hickshit screamed as the pickup nearly flipped to the side. Billy jerked the wheel, trying his best to not over correct the truck.

"It's climbing in!" She yelled and pointed. *No shit*, he could see that from the side view.

"Hold on, and *fucking hell* stop screaming!" He threw the pickup into second gear, revved the engine and flicked the steering wheel towards the Ditch. As fast as he fucking could, he spun the steering wheel the opposite direction into the other lane.

If anyone could make this piece of junk pull a bootleg turn, it'd be him.

The pickup truck skidded across the tacky pavement just like Billy anticipated and the El Caiman scrabbled on the side of the pickup. Billy floored it again, throwing the truck into reverse pulling a near perfect 180. Something under the seat hit the door with a heavy 'clink'.

Jiāyóu (go go)! El Caiman screeched as he slipped off and fell, getting his fat face run over by the pickup's front tire.

"Get fucked." Billy flashed a feral smile, but it didn't last long.

"Cooooo!" Little Hickshit exclaimed like he just won the NBA finals with a dunk.

Billy's breath hitched.

Asphalt in his rear view mirror started to fucking ERUPT UP. Like Jaws through that boat, the road buckled up! El Caiman twitched and slowly GOT UP too. This was just *not* his day.

He kept flooring the truck in reverse, dodging as best he could the

mountains forming in the damn street, while watching for more El Caimans. He couldn't keep this up without Little Hickshit's help.

"I said stop screaming, not stop helping! I need you to watch the forest, see if you see any more El Caimans, and fucking tell me if the one I HIT WITH THE TRUCK comes at us again." Billy yelled, voice hoarse and a hair higher than he intended.

"You're the one screaming, not me! Don't crash us!" Erica sat up in the truck's cab, and Billy fully turned his upper body to face out the back of the pickup. Now his full attention could be on road erupting behind them like it wanted to suck them down it. He wished he could get the pickup going forward again, but pulling a J turn with the road like this was damn *risky*.

Wait.

Did this...wasteland *learn*? Was it making the road do this because it saw he could *drive like a madman*?

"Billy it's still coming, and another one on the right, two o'clock!" Erica didn't scream, but she wasn't fucking *zen* either. He was juicing the engine, but even he couldn't keep this pace and steer well for long in REVERSE. "Those Caiman pendejos are definitely chasing us!" Billy sneered, those crocodile cunts were a distraction. This wasteland was trying to make him FUCK UP and crash the truck. He had to stay fucking focused so he could figure out what they were *really* after.

Too bad they didn't ha....the *clink*. Bourbon woman. Bourbon. NEIL.

"Little Hickshit, look under the seat, quick." Billy barked out, swerving hard, almost putting the truck on two wheels again. She yelped but he heard a tall-tale *clink*.

"Turkey whiskey?" Little Hickshit grunted a bit, pulling it from under the bench. Billy held out his hand and she gave him a look.

"Open it."

"Uh, no!?"

"Open it. I'm not gonna fucking *drink* it! Ju—" He narrowly missed another fucking CRATER.

"Stop ordering me around!" She held the bottle back from him like this was the TIME for THIS.

"NOW!" He shouted, turning his eyes to her, blue eyes locking on her dark ones. "Such a brassy tart, PLEASE?"

"Was that so hard? Jeesh. We're *partners*, you can't just boss me around." He heard the pop of the bottle opening, and Billy's gut shifted a little acidic in guilt because well, he *knew* that feeling.

He wasn't going to be NEIL to ERICA.

"Alright, *Camarade*, together let's show them who's boss. Firestarter merit badge time, take a scrap of Neil's coat, stuff it into the bottle then get the li—fuck!" Billy hit the side of one of the peaks of pavement, bumping the truck and almost causing him to lose control. "get the lighter from my jacket pocket and light the scrap." Billy lowered his voice to his normal charming tone, biting his lip trying to keep the truck on the road and distance between them and the gaining Caimans.

"Will this actually WORK?" She asked, but he saw out of his periphery her reaching for the scraps of fabric anyway.

"*Seguro*, definitely, because that cock Neil, along with that whackjob Hunter H Thompson, loved Wild Turkey 101. Proof that high will do the trick." Billy grinned like mad and threw a quick wink Erica's direction. He got Antoine's reading level up with Thompson's nutso book because like Ant would've paid attention to anything *normal*. He felt her small hand slip into his pocket and palm the zippo.

"So...when do I do this?" He heard the 'snick' of the lighter.

"I gotta try to J-turn this big-ass rust bucket back around. Your window will face them, so throw it at the Caiman that's easier to hit, or you think is uglier." Billy clenched his jaw, the erupting asphalt was becoming increasingly harder to avoid. Also, that turn that Little Hickshit told him to take for the hospital was coming up. He had to

time this JUST RIGHT.

A soft, orange light lit up next to him. She got that polyester shit fabric to light nice and bright. Good.

"This is for Jenny Baker and Molly Mitchell who wouldn't let me play dodgeball with them." She sure sounded *amped*. Thank fucking god she wasn't bitching like Sinclair or any of those other geekqueefs would. Billy was also glad that she wasn't lecturing him on how much of an unbalanced nut job he was, like Maxine would.

"Now!" He flicked the steering wheel to the ditch then whipped it around back into the opposing lane. Little Hickshit's window lined up perfectly with the road.

DAEBAK! (jackpot)

Wait. Did Crazy Little Hickshit unbuckle and lean her whole body was actually OUT THE WINDOW?

He had a bad feeling, one of those 'Javier' feelings. Once he got the steering wheel evened out he chanced a look at Erica. Her stupid bitch ass was gonna fall out! Without much thought he grabbed his knife from his belt and stabbed Neil's oversized jacket through the seat to keep her in. At least he hoped. He couldn't hold onto her and steer at the same time.

"YYYYaaaaaahh!" She yelled as he maneuvered the swerving truck another full 180 degrees. He heard the bottle break, saw the fire in the rearview overtake one of the Caimans. A fucking deadshot this one!

It yowled like his maman's friend, Tiffany, when Simone hit her upside the head with her own vinyl platform boot.

"Holy shit! Nice shot, Camarade." Billy laughed and whooped. He heard her yelp, so he quickly yanked Erica's calf so she was back fully in the truck.

"That was...AWESOME." He could tell by Little Hickshit's voice that the adrenaline was causing her to shake as she put back on her seatbelt. He was shaking too as he threw the car into neutral to

double clutch it to first. Fuck maybe they will both—

An explosion to his left. Too close. He could see now what had been erupting the damn asphalt.

Roots.

"Putain!(fuck)" A knot of gnarled roots punched up through the asphalt, bucking the driver's side wheel up. He turned the wheels, he knew it was going to flip, but if he turned in the opposite way, it may land upright again.

He twisted his face to Erica, her dark eyes wide, and jaw slack in shock. He braced himself with his left arm and shoved her head down with his right. That familiar lack of gravity feeling kicked in as his side of the truck vaulted up and with a deafening crash and shattering of glass the truck overturned and flipped.

...

...

Crunch.

Billy didn't remember passing out, but usually you fucking DON'T.

-ly! Get u-hurt-" Billy groaned. His whole body had ached like he had taken a hell of a beating from Neil, but a new flare of pain shocked through his gut. Ano Ang (What the)? Did someone gangbanger stab him *again*? He grimaced and opened his eyes slowly.

He blinked. Everything was fucking grey and he was...in Neil's truck? What in the...

Fuck. The *wasteland*! Erica Sinclair.

Well, he managed to get the truck to land upright. *Not* a classic Loga fuck-up. Marcus would be so proud.

He tried to move but screamed high instead. A white hot brand of pain lanced through him.

"Gae-sae-ggi (son of a bitch)." Billy lowly rasped out. Everything fucking *sucked* and his whole body throbbed like he had been hit by a bus. He blinked again, trying to focus and let his head loll over to glance to the passenger side of the pickup. Little Hickshit had a flashlight on him and one hand on his shoulder, eyes as big as snowglobes. She looked...okay? She had a lot of blood on her forehead, but even small head wounds bled a lot.

That stupid hammer lay in her lap. How that didn't bludgeon and *kill* one of them in the flip he'll never know. Maybe she held onto it the whole time.

"About time you woke up. Don't freak out, but uh, you're hurt." She gestured down and then he saw what was causing him so much fucking grief. One of the attack roots had gone through the thin door frame and speared him through. It was about as thick around and long as a pool cue. Fuck. Mierda. Putang-ina.

He tried to move, but sheer AGONY slashed through him. Was he was pinned to the back of seat by the root?

"What Bulhaeng (shit luck)." He gripped rough wood with his hands, he needed to yank it out. Oh, this was going to be fucking FUN.

"Here let—" He cut her a *look*. He could do this on his own. He didn't need a damn Girl Scout playing NURSE. Knuckles white, he gazed down at the damage. He hadn't bled out that much yet, but it was gonna be a back-alley abortion soon.

Yi, Er, San... Jiāyóu! (1, 2, 3 go!)

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaughhhh. Shiiiiiiiiiiiiit." He grunted and screamed like some broad in labor. The pain was definitely top five in his life. With everything he had, he pulled the fucking SPEAR out of his stomach. Liver. Somewhere BAD.

Billy, panting and groaning, tried to hide the fact that he was bleeding like a stuck pig, but it was a lost cause. Blood ran through his fingers like that one Thanksgiving his mom cut open that cheap box wine by accident and it gushed everywhere. He and his mom cracked up about the mess for a solid half-hour because their clean

(for once) apartment turned into that elevator scene from the Shining. They also had Antoine and the rest of the losers coming over in like fifteen minutes.

This was more like the time Baya ran from the cops (again) and sliced his stomach open on a barbed wire fence he could usually free-run over no problem.

"See, definitely He-Man." Little Hickshit gestured with the hammer(no, he was NOT because he was about to *pass out* again). His body rolled in crunching waves of scalding acid. He couldn't catch his breath. PUTA MADRE.

A shriek ripped through the air. Caiman. Where—

"Behi—" He couldn't yell it out in time. It's scorched, creepy long fingers grabbed her and yanked her through where the windshield used to be. She shrieked high and swung at it with the hammer.

It had her.

Caiman's face split open way wider than Cujo's could, bragging about its barbed, swampy, snatch.

Not this SHIT AGAIN

Actually, it snarled, as if *taunting* him.

Oh, it was ON.

"Put me Down! Take that! BILLY!" He could easily hear her and the scrape of the Caiman's steps over the thrum of the engine and the blood rushing in his ears.

He rocked his body forward and pain rifled through his body, he could barely sit up, much less *chase* that infuriating piece of shit. Javier would know...wait. Engine. The stick was in neutral from the J turn.

The truck was still *running*.

"I'M COMIN FOR YOU." He didn't know who he was shouting at,

Erica or El Caiman, but either way he threw the stick in first and prayed when he floored it. If the God existed that Maman swore existed he'd make this truck GO.

It *did*.

He let loose a genuine smile and laugh of relief.

The tires bit and chirped on the asphalt and he gave chase. Allons-y! (let's go!). Billy didn't have a plan per-se, but all he had to do was hit El Caiman without hitting Erica in the process. He gunned it hard and the tach redlined.

The hunt was on!

He was El Lobo Feroz, he was far more *terrifying*, *far* more *vicious* than that monster could *hope* to be. He was going to CHEW that Caiman up. He was going to tear his muscles from his bone for taking Little Hickshit and crowing about it.

He was going fucking scalp it, shit in its skull, and get her home.

He revved it into second and caught up with the loping El Caiman. Time for a good ol' American drive by! That nail bat would be *perfecto* right about now. His mind flashed to Steve Harrington with his stupid soft preppy smile and his stupid soft, brown eyes (ugh, not the time or place, Loga). Billy reached over on the seat and despite the truck flipping the knife was still lodged in the seat, with a lot of Neil's old Jacket.

Oh yeah, LET'S DECAPITATE THAT UGLY CUNT.

He grabbed the knife with his right hand, flipped it to his left, and reached out the shattered window. Yeah his shoulder might get dislocated, or something, but this was *SO worth* it. He had never done anything this stupid before for such a RIGHT reason.

It keyed him up, and he grinned with all his teeth like a PSYCHO.

This was so opposite of what he *should* probably be doing (Sang Hoon would have fucking struck him by now), but FUCK SHOULD, he wanted BLOOD.

He could have only *three* fingers, and he could still need only *one* hand to count how many people he'd do something *this stupid* for in Hawkins, and get this *stoked* about it.

El Caiman had her under his left arm like a fucking football and she was kicking and flailing like crazy. She even still had the flashlight and hammer and was beating him both with them! Fucking scrapper.

He remembered what Baya taught him, keep your wrist straight, *commit*. He swerved to the right side of the Caiman, which was hard now because the suspension was clacking and bucking everywhere from the roll. That snatch-faced sshyang (bastard) had scratched her up SOME and he was gonna make a *jacket* out of him for it. He floored the whining engine and right as he got next to it he used the speed of the car, edge of the blade, angled the bowie just so.

The Caiman turned to slice at him with his free hand but missed because Billy KNEW he'd pull a move like that. These monsters were just as stupid as those Russian coke dealers back in LA. He jukeed, recovered...aaaannnnnnnddddd

THUUUUUUUUCK.

"ENCULÉ!" He bellowed out deep and laughed as the knife bit into the neck of the Caiman. He didn't get to yell 'get assfucked' in French that often anymore.

He almost lost the grip on the knife but with a wound that deep it had to be a seungli (win).

However, Billy also knew he didn't take it clean off because otherwise he probably would have fucked his elbow all up. He slammed on the brakes and threw the truck in neutral right at the intersection they were supposed to turn at for the hospital. Billy threw up the handbrake and shoved open the door ignoring all the protests of dull and spiking pain in his body.

Like a fucking Yaoguai(Demon), he stalked out to finish the job.

Time break some bones and slurp down some marrow.

"DING DING, THAT'S THE DINNER BELL AND GATOR'S ON THE

MENU!" Billy shouted at the El Caiman, sprawled out on the road. Hickshit and she had begun to alternate hopping back from his sharp fingers and wailing on him with her hammer. He still had a limp, but it didn't matter because his legs had already carried him to his prey.

"Big Cityshit! We got him!" She yelled as liquid dribbled down his left leg, blood from that damned wound. It ran into his blown out boot making it squish a little. Still didn't matter.

"Sure did, *camarade*." Billy flipped the knife to his right hand. El Caiman's monster goop was spewing all over the place as he squirmed on its back like a horny slut on the asphalt. *Wait*. Where was the first one he ran over?

Scrape.

He heard it behind him and he twisted and plunged before he knew what his mind was doing. He connected with something, but he was swatted aside like garbage across the road. His body smacked the pavement and his ribs rippled out in fresh, warm spasms of pain.

"NO! Get up!"

"Shhhhhhhhhittt." Billy moaned. His temple wound reopened, blood flowed into his eye. He couldn't fuck this up right when they were so close to WINNING.

He pressed his palms against the nasty pavement and pushed up. This was HIS HOUSE. HE was KING.

He forced himself up to his knees, but his body spasmed and he collapsed to the asphalt again. His body wasn't on the same level as his mind. C'mon....

Icy, spindly fingers gripped his shoulder and ragdolled him over the road to the grass. He hit on his back hard on the frigid dirt and tumbled. He literally ate dirt. FUCK LOGA, LEVEANTATE (get up).

He had lost the knife somewhere in the last throw and everything FUCKING SUCKED.

"Fuck...you..." He let out a small cry of frustration as he got to one

knee. Maman wouldn't want him to *give up* here, Antoine would give him *that* look with his eyebrows, and Mei would just tsk at him and *clean* her nails.

He got to his other knee, panting chest heaving. Ok. Up. He bent down and picked up his knife despite the pain in his gut begging him to just lay down and die.

"You got it, He Man!" Was Little Hickshit cheering him on?

Future Leather Jacket One, and Matching Pants Two, looked worse for the wear (yeah maybe he did too). But, if Erica could keep Jacket One busy, he could carve up Pants Two that was *hissing* at him. He had spent his *whole life* fighting dudes bigger than him, he could do this. All he had to do was use El Caiman's own momentum against him when he lunged, swing around him, and sever his carotid just like the Cujo.

Billy staggered forward when a HEINOUS screech blared through the tree line on the other side of the road. Pants Two stopped his approach and retreated back. Even Jacket One that Little Hickshit was still wailing on, rolled, knocked the hammer out of her hands kinda close to him, and limped back across the street.

"*Camarade*, regroup over here, Huílái (come back)." Billy's voice cracked and he sounded like he swallowed asbestos. Erica, a bit beat up, ran over to him, she had lost a Ked sneaker somewhere. She picked up the hammer on the way.

She stood beside him, not cowering behind him. That would have surprised him if he didn't know her so well by now.

"What's happening?" She asked and he remembered the pickup. That hunk of junk was *still* running.

"Nothing fucking good. I'm gonna distract whatever is coming, alright? Make a break for the truck and get the fuck outta dodge." Billy panted and doubled over, blood gurgled everywhere. DAMN.

"Uh, You're a real moron aren't you? We're partners, pluuuus I can't *drive*. Pendejo." What?

"You're the dāiguā (idiot)! I taught you how to drive last sum... Oh. Nevermind." He taught MAX, not Erica. Was this some psychology bullshit or *what*? Billy didn't have time to fucking PSYCHOANALYZE HIS PSYCHOTIC MIND because some *spider giraffe shadow monster* just grew out from the tree line.

Now, this was nightmare fuel, Hunter H. Thompson's would write a bad LSD trip like this.

Terror tingled up his spine.

"Last chance to ditch, Little Hickshit." Billy breathed out. He was in way over his head. This had to be The Kingpin and there was no way he could stab a fucking *shadow*. Bayani would be saying he could hear its color and to say his damn prayers. Sang Hoon would be lighting a farewell cigarette, and Marcus would be unleashing Ripley, his stupid-smart Doberman, to bolt and find Jerry.

"This isn't a drill!" He gritted out, glaring down at little Hickshit to hide his fear.

She didn't budge. She held fast to his bloody, nasty wrist with her sweaty, sticky hand.

"I toooold youuuu, partners stick together, 'sides my mama said always hold your ground when it matters." She looked at him like she was talking about standing up to a bully or a *debate* class. He doubted this is what her mother meant when she recited that little PSA.

"*FINE*. Die here with *yours truly*." He muttered. The spindly, creepy spider giraffe shadow crept closer and Billy took one last sidelong view of the truck. It must have read its mind because the truck LEVITATED AND FLEW INTO THE FUCKING WOODS. It stayed lodged in an oak tree like a fucking Christmas ornament.

"Poltergeist!" Little Hickshit gasped and her hand squeezed his wrist tight.

"Got the lighter?" He asked and she dropped his wrist, dug through Neil's jacket pocket and gave it to him. He tapped out a cigarette out of the battered pack that managed to stay in his pocket (again how,

he had little idea). He lit the cigarette and took a few shaky steps forward. He was not about to wait for The Kingpin to come to him in *his own* house. Little Hickshit followed suit and he unfortunately had to use her shoulder to support his weight or his left ankle would buckle.

The Kingpin wanted to *parley* or some shit or they'd be in the tree along with Neil's truck.

He put the cigarette to his lips and inhaled deep. HELL YEAH. He could never give smoking up.

"JUST WHO ARE YOU?!" Little Hickshit pointed with her flashlight at the Poltergeist and it shifted around. Did it not understand English? Well, it owed him some fucking answers.

"What she said. Qui es tu? Quien eres tu? Nǐ shì shéi? Sino Ka? Neo nugu ni?" He tried them all, French, Spanish, Mandarin, Tagalog, and finally Korean. He doubted the fucking thing spoke any of them, but with how superstitious all his family was, save Sang Hoon, he gave them all a shot.

He took another drag when the thing shifted all around and lifted three of its...arms? Legs?

"Naneun manh-eun ileum-eul gajigo." The poltergeist's voice sounded like sandpaper over a wet chalkboard. Billy almost coughed out the smoke of his cigarette. Big anti-superstitious Sang Hoon would be SO PISSED a supernatural bitch like this spoke *Korean*.

"You got many names, huh? How about one be 'my thirsty bitch'? You've sure gone through FUCK ALL trouble to get in my pants. Too fucking bad though, jib-ae ka-seo ddal-ddal-i-na cheo chuhan bo-ji (go home and masturbate, you aren't my type, ugly cunt)." Billy's eyes lit up with the taunt and blew a smoke ring at it to be a prick.

"You can understand it?" Erica asked next to him and he kinda forgot that she would want to know what talking about.

"It's speaking damn *Korean*. Don't ask me the *why*, maybe it's because it was the last language I asked it in." The Kingpin was fucking with

them, it probably understood English.

The spindly bitch didn't take kindly to his suggestion. With one of its arms it plucked the truck from the oak and TOOK A FUCKING BITE OUT OF THE CAB.

It dropped the half-eaten truck on the road with a deafening crunch right between the Caimans. HOLY FUCK.

"Naneun nae geos-i mueos-inji wonhae." It scratched out. That caused Billy's blood to chill to snow. Well, what was left of it.

"..." Billy inhaled shakily, he feared EXACTLY fucking this.

"What did it say Big Cityshit?" Erica tugged his arm a bit like little kids always did. Billy choked out another drag.

"It said, it wants what *belongs* to him." Billy mumbled, the tone the Poltergeist used suggested it wanted THEM.

"Well, you stupid *pendejo*, I don't know what you think we have, but we don't have ANYTHING! What *I* want is for you to take us home because you ate our car!" Erica Sinclair fronted tough as nails. She reminded him so much of Mei, but with less cursing and prissiness. She kept death grip on his left wrist that he had planted on her shoulder to hold some of his weight.

The Poltergeist made a sound like two stray cats rutting, but he knew a *laugh* when he heard one.

Then the other two shadowy arms rose up and its body changed into something larger, bulkier, with shadowy needles all over.

"It's a poltergeist, Little Hickshit." Billy whispered. "You know those greedy fucks only want *one* thing." His light lit up like a beacon as he pointedly stared down at her. Her eyes got big then hard like that volcanic glass you saw in museums. She grabbed his elbow and he shifted his arm off her shoulder to grab hers. They slid their hands down to the others wrists and did the pointer fingers then grabbed hands.

It came for them before Billy could say 'ready'.

The shadow bulldozed its arm down Billy's throat despite the cigarette and Billy shrieked. His whole body burst at the seams, like the fucking shadow was trying to over-inflate his blood vessels and twist his bones around his joints.

Visions of Hawkins, the REAL Hawkins looked like a war zone. Something Neil would be right at home in.

Bodies clogged the street, blood flowed in the gutters. Cars blazed on fire, buildings crumbled to rubble. Hell on Earth. He saw Erica and him standing there, only *they* weren't *them*, at least he didn't think so because bodies ringed around them like they were the epicenter of a fucking corpse explosion.

Erica's brother, a woman, a man, her parents.

Max.

Steve *hot as this hell* Harrington.

All Gutted, scorched, dismembered, bent, broken, Dead as four o'clock.

The knife in NOT-BILLY'S hand had brown and long red hair stuck all over the blade. NOT-ERICA had her hammer above her head, dried blood and kinky black hair was glued to the claw.

Was this freak showing him his PLAN? The Future?! Where was Bayani when he needed him?!

Billy fought a rising tide of panic. He might have done some shit in South Central, but he *never* did anything *that* and he definitely didn't want to be A MASS MURDERER. This poltergeist wanted HAWKINS, and he wanted him to be the harbinger of the FUCKING APOCALYPSE.

Billy's brain throbbed and the pressure built up around screams. He didn't sign up for this.... He couldn't handle this alone....The hand he was holding tightened its grip.

BUT.

But Billy wasn't *alone*. ERICA. Billy gripped her hand like a lifeline, it may as well be. He promised Erica that they were going to topple this Kingpin and that's *exactly* what they were going to do.

His tendons and ligaments snapped and sparked with pain and one of his cracked ribs definitely fully broke.

AND.

And Billy was the *baddest, hardest* PRICK in Hawkins, not this possessive, rapist ghost trying to deep throat him. NO FUCKING WAY. He was going to BITE THIS FUCKER'S DICK OFF. Mei had done the same to some dirtbag before, he would do the *same*.

His lungs burned and heartrate spiked and dipped and stopped then spiked again.

SO.

Billy did what Luc William Logan did *best*. Billy used every muscle in his body, rolling momentum from his ankles, calves, quads, hips, abs, traps, pecks, lats, and he let loose a *roar*. This big bad wolf was not going to be tamed, much less *brainwashed* by a freakshow phantom!

Like he'd be caught dead doing TAKING ORDERS.

Static electricity, like just like before a thunderstorm, surged from his body through his left arm to Erica. Showtime partner! Before his lungs collapsed from the vice-like clamping on his chest, Billy raged back.

Erica screamed something beside him so he chorused in.

"I'M THE KING, NOW BOW TO ME!" Billy's voice was all thunder, but from his mouth spouted an inferno. A blazing, torrent of fire jettisoned from his mouth that would Kurt Russel's flamethrower in the Thing to shame. The shadow shrunk and cried, and reared back damn quick.

Beside him Little Hickshit's hands and flashlight glared brighter than a fucking lighthouse. The grey landscape lit up so bright the trees lost their color.

"AAANNNNIIIII!(no!)" The shadow's bulky frame silhouetted and almost instantly vaporized through the flames and light. Billy's flames finally petered out to smoke and the flashlight flickered dim. Billy's pulse raced, but the pain...everything for the moment had subsided.

"..."

"..."

"Whoa....did you breathe FIRE?" Erica asked and that was when Billy noticed the cigarette ashed to the filter in his mouth. Cigarette. Flashlight. Did that Poltergeist accidentally give them *superpowers* based on what they were *holding*?

What the actual fuck?

"Don't look at me, you can light up the whole Hollywood sign with your HANDS." Billy wondered how his lungs didn't feel like charcoal.

"You saw what I saw right? Lucas and my ma—"

"Not gonna happen. We won't let it. That Poltergeist is more fucking delusional than your brother is about life, or Steve Harrington is about Princess Nancy Wheeler." Billy stated it with enough conviction to make Erica nod.

He heard a growl, the Caimans!

"Oh, god, SUCK ME!" Billy decided to try and breath out fire like he did before. A smaller plume of flame erupted from his mouth, barbeque time! The Caiman, probably Pants Two, yelped and retreated back into the treeline.

Little Hickshit tried the same with her flashlight. Her hands lit up like a spotlight and the other followed his slam piece back across the street into the forest.

"..."

"..."

"Ok. Hospital. You're...a mess. And I'm still thirsty." Erica finally said.

He didn't really know what to say about what the FUCK just happened except now he could breathe FIRE, and she could signal planes to land. With no car, he limped through the forest, and eventually the trees thinned out and there were post-apocalyptic buildings and gross shit everywhere. Luckily, there were other cars he could potentially hot wire including his favorite, an ambulance.

Yeah, yeah there was that ONE time on a DARE from *Marcus* of all people....wait.

"Hey, Little Hickshit, listen up." He called out. Whatever numbing effect on all the pain he endured, waned and the pain slowly ebbed back out. The bloody footprints he left on the sidewalk as a damn obvious clue that he probably didn't have long to live even if they stitched him up.

She paused.

"Whatever that Poltergeist did to us, it's our secret. Being *special* isn't *good*, it's a pain-in-the-ass, so don't say shit to anyone. Not to your mama, not to *anyone*. Same about what that Poltergeist showed us, you don't want to get fucking *committed*." Billy cautioned seriously. If someone knew she could light stuff up, they might use her for some sort of experiments. Bayani, with his hallucinations and visions, was brought in for tests when he was a kid, and they tried to KEEP him. Maya and Jerry helped Bayani hide from the scientists trying to pick him apart like a *lab rat*.

He also just knew from being mixed (even though he passed white), *special* wasn't *fun*.

She zipped her lips and threw away the key.

"I can keep secrets, like I told you. *No one* needs to know OUR business. When I get back, I'm making you a friendship bracelet by the way, and don't worry, it will be *way* less tacky than your earrings." Erica fucking Sinclair might be delusional too.

"I'll be the judge of that. I'm not wearing shit if its—" Billy coughed out hard and wet. Blood. A lot of it. The root must have nicked or pierced his stomach too. He hid the blood in his palm but he was

fairly certain Erica saw it.

There wasn't anything to say though.

They staggered through the gaping, broken doors of the darkened hospital.

"First thing's first. Water and drugs." Billy blurted out. It was supposed to be a joke but Little Hickshit shrugged.

"Pharmacy is that-a-way." She pointed down the hall and he hoped there weren't stairs involved.

Fate was on their side. The hospital had a pharmacy on the first floor with the ER, and they found a water fountain with *drinkable* water. Little Hickshit drank a gallon of it. He didn't realize how thirsty he was until he drank too.

Little Hickshit opened the door and inside were sooty, dusty, hopefully NOT expired bottles and vials.

He needed two things. Well, maybe three. He willed his hands to stop shaking.

"Alright, whatever we did against the Kingpin and his bitches won't last long. They'll be back." Billy groaned, the pain began to really hit him like a freight train. "So, we gotta fight smart, not hard. The Caimans bleed, so we can use that against them."

"How?"

"Sedatives. Ketamine. I'll get the Ketamine, you can get as many insulin syringes as you can, 28 gauge needles, bigger the better. Don't ask me how I know, it's complicated." Billy cautioned. His Maman had a...*bad time* when Mémère and Pépère bit it. Ant did too before he met him. It was one reason why Ant and his family moved from New Orleans to LA. Marcus, Ant's cousin, was supposed to help him on the 'straight and narrow'...which was fucking hilarious considering what a *flamer* Ant turned out to be.

"Jeeez, don't be a weirdo, it's FINE. You think at this point I care if you're a druggie or know one?" Billy snorted, yeah, Erica didn't give a

damn. He maneuvered around to an aisle of vials and searched for K.

Eventually he found a couple vials of Ketamine and the were fucking *current*. He limped down a different aisle, his ribs and stab wound were really now fucking with him.

V. Vicodin. Wánshàn (perfect). He grabbed a bottle and popped two and pocketed the rest. When he did his fingers slid and hit that baggie of coke. Good. He'd save that for the finale. It was just then Little Hickshit returned with two baggies full of syringes.

"Got twenty." Billy threw out his hand for their handshake.

"Bueno, now..." Billy hobbled over to the counter and slid down the back of it...he needed rest...badly. "We gotta fill these to last mark. The trick..." He took one of the baggies and sliced it open with the knife and took one out. He flicked the cap off and plunged it into the vial and turned it upside down, pulled the plunger to fill it.

"The trick, is to get the cunts in the neck and push down the plunger." He continued. "This isn't the movies. If you get them anywhere else, leg, back, chest, it can take like five minutes for them to slow down. Neck? Fifteen to thirty seconds flat they'll be so high they won't fight worth shit. I know from *personal experience*." Billy really did have to thank Max for giving him this really fucking *ingenious* idea even if it was at his OWN expense. A dose of K like this should slow them down or at least make them see some shit.

"OK. Got it....you ok?" He wasn't used to people asking sincerely about his *wellbeing*. It threw him off.

"Malaki, *just great*, gotta....nap. Wake me up when they come back." Billy leaned his head back against the shelf under the counter and watched Little Hickshit fiddle with the vial and one of the syringes. She gave him the same irritated look that Sang Hoon would give him when he took his last cigarette on purpose. Or the same look that Harrington gave him when he would flirt with him in the cafeteria. Hehe.

"Before you nap, you owe me a two truths one lie." He did, didn't he? She smiled a little and filled one of the syringes just like he showed

her.

"Shoot."

"One, my Aunt Marion moved to Haiti for a while because she got into trouble in Oakland. Two, my favorite color is pink because it's Barbie's. Three, a lot of girls in my class think I'm a bully, and won't pick me in games." His heart twanged a little, because he knew precisely which number it was that was the lie.

"Two. If you like pink it's not because a doll likes it...." His head bobbed to the left and his eyes closed. He was really fucking tired.

"Shoot. Thought I'd get you." He heard as he finally got some sleep.

...

...

"Big Cityshit, wake up and eat something." A hand shook him a bit. Normally he'd backhand the first person who tried dared shake him awake, but he was laying on his side and one of his arms had fallen asleep. He flashed open his eyes.

The first thing he saw was right in front of his face was a Snickers bar, and a thing of Twinkies. Hảo jîle! YES!

"Vending machine." He glanced up at Little Hickshit and the second thing he noticed was she had cleaned her face off. She looked a little less like a hot mess.

"...er clean." His voice sounded like hot garbage. He grabbed the Twinkies.

His favorite!

"Yup, Cleaned you up too, and I bandaged your wound up as best I could. I have my first aid merit badge and 'to serve God, my country, and to help people at all times' is the Girl Scout motto. Soooooo you're *welcome* AND you so owe me." She grinned proudly. He tore open the package of Twinkies with his teeth and chomped down on both Twinkies at the same time.

"I difnt athk you fer shiiitht. I oh nuffin." Billy's mouth was full of soft sponge cake and sweet cream. He didn't eat these really anymore, didn't fit his diet. When he looked down at his stomach, there was a gauze patch over the wound and it was already dark red. Outcome for him was not looking too *sunny*.

"Ew! Who eats Twinkies like that?!" She pinched her face up and he smacked his lips. "Don't chew with your mouth open, ugly cow." She sassed.

"Me u Pifg" He taunted back.

"*You're* the one stuffing your face and eating Twinkies **WRONG!** Boys are so gross and stupid." Well, he couldn't argue with that.

"uu camt eat twiniees wron!" He finished off the Twinkies and moved onto the snickers.

"Uh. Yeah you can. Everything about that was wrong. Illegal. That's probably the worst law you broke, Twinkie law." She sighed deep and plopped down next to him. He wolfed the snickers down too and rocked up to sit.

"I bet that 'Ding Dong' Chief of Hawkins police would find a way to arrest me for it too." Billy chuckled even though it rocked his ribs. He couldn't resist the pun even though it wasn't his humor. Sang Hoon loved puns. His temple itched and when he scratched it he felt a big Band-Aid. She was probably the first person to bandage him up since Ant.

"...You lost right to retain Sno-balls..." Little Hickshit laughed out and *damn* she could be *witty*.

"...any Zingers will be used against you in a court of law." He continued, laughing hard and deep and smiling wide and true. His ribs really fucking did hurt this and the bandage bled out more. Worth it. Now, he needed his post meal cigarette.

"When you aren't so angry, you can actually be funny." Little Hickshit messed with her socked foot. Never found that shoe.

"When you aren't so difficult, so can you." He admitted with a shrug

and tapped another cigarette and lit it. Six left. He exhaled carefully to not *flamethrower* the pharmacy.

"Oh yeaaaaaaah." He side eyed Little Hickshit. "Don't smoke. And don't do what I'm about to do either." Billy was about to shift to reach his little baggie of coke when that all too familiar shriek ripped through the air.

Those stupid fucks came finally back for dessert.

They eyed each other as she passed him a tranq.

"I'm gonna get out there and roast em. You strobe em next then we tranq em, ok? I'm gonna turn these putas...*bitches*... into gumbo." Billy winced as he stood working whatever blood he had left back into his legs. His body still ached everywhere despite the Vicodin, but he had work to do and he couldn't pop any more without feeling off.

"You can be really weird." She shook her head, but she went for their handshake anyway.

"You got no idea, sweetheart." Billy flashed a grin and snapped his jaw.

He hobbled to the door of the pharmacy and looked out the smudged window. Two of them, they probably followed his damn trail of BLOOD.

He opened the door, inhaled deep and when they spread their toothy cunts at him he exhaled deep and strong. Flames filled the hallway and he sprayed. They took the ceiling but he definitely got one good.

They screeched and shrieked when Erica came up from behind him and turned on her flashlight to blind the entire hallway in light. They curled up and screamed. Billy summoned the last bit of his energy and marched down the hall, bum leg and all, and little Hickshit sprinted past him to fucking jam one of the squirming Caimans in the neck with the syringe and press down before it backhanded her across the hall. Her head hit the wall pretty hard. DAMN. He finally got to his Caiman and stabbed that fuck right in the carotid and pressed down.

Nighty fucking Night.

The other Caiman got up and he twisted his head to exhale in Jacket One's direction while he fumbled with the knife to eviscerate Pants Two he was kneeling over. His whole chest lanced and cracked in pain but he just had to hold out. He had POWER now, he had to fucking make a STAND.

He hacked at the Caiman's throat below him. Over and over.

The walls and floor began to catch fire, good. He stabbed the Caiman below him again in the gut and carved up and over. Where was this fucker's heart? He wanted to take a BIG BITE OUT IT like the Poltergeist did the pickup. Pants two below him wasn't moving much, but he each time he tried to grapple him, Billy hacked at its fingers. Sliced three off already.

"Erica, move if you..." She rubbed her head and he could that it fucking hurt, but she was a trooper. She got up and raised her hammer.

Jacket One, the Caiman he just charbroiled began to slow down and sway from side to side. Erica blinded him again with her light and his skin started to actually bubble from the inside out. She got her hammer, and hauled ass over to him and began WAILING on him like Michel fucking Myers.

Billy used the rest of his cigarette to blow a fire ring down at his Caiman just to see if he could.

Eventually, despite the pain in his body, his Caiman stopped moving. Then Erica's. The hospital was still sort of on fire, but for whatever reason HIS fire didn't smoke or choke them out, it just sort of... danced.

"..."

"..."

Billy moved to the side of the nasty body and collapsed, eyes closed. He let the knife clatter to the goo coated floor. He had lost feeling in his feet and legs a while ago...his internal bleeding had leached out

of control for too long.

"Big Cityshit!" Erica scampered to his side, but before she could say anything else everything went silent.

"Hello." Billy opened his eyes with a start. That was NOT Erica's voice.

He was laying down in some sort of liquid room...Erica was standing in front of him, one hand fisted on her hip the other...out in front of her. Her legs were planted wide, as if protecting or shielding HIM.

"Who the *hell* are you?" Whoa. It was the first time he heard her curse. He struggled to get up but if he were to be honest, it probably wouldn't happen. What was going ON?

"I'm El. I'm a friend." Billy managed to get himself propped up on an elbow and saw...Danny from the Shining? No...that couldn't be right...a girl. Some girl with worse hair than Little Hickshit's.

"I don't know you. You aren't a friend of mine, and for all I know, you're with the Poltergeist and the Caimans. If you mess with me or my partner, He Man, you're gonna get it." Little hickshit had the syringes out and the hammer.

"Partner? He Man? Billy. Loga." She looked confused, but he was definitely *more* confused.

"How the *fuck* do you know that name? Did you get in my *head*? Fess up, freak." Billy scrabbled around for his knife. This was some sort of trap. The knife next him spun and skittered through the liquid across the room.

She did that!

"YOU ARE WITH THE POLTERGUEST! LIAR!" Erica hollered. Oh *shit*. Girl Scout was PISSED.

"No, friends don't Lie! Lucas and Steve are my friends. I am helping them. We will bring you back from the Upside-Down." The girl looked like she was telling the truth but there was something wrong with her. Like she was part retarded. Maybe she was like Bayani. He

also didn't get how she knew his name. Only Susan and Max knew it and he would have *no idea* why they'd bring it up because one: it was TABOO, two: why did it matter?

"Friends with preppy, pretty White Knight, Steve Harrington, huh? Never seen you around." Billy wasn't quite buying it yet. He had never seen her around the arcade with Max or at one of the geekqueef's houses.

"I hide." So, like Baya, *maybe*. "Steve is worried. Scared. He will come." She turned her creepy blank gaze to Erica. "Your mama, Hop, and I are coming too. We will bring you home." She insisted. He didn't know who she was, or who 'Hop' was, but he definitely believed that Vivian Sinclair and Steve Harrington would fight *tooth and nail* to get Erica back home.

Wait. This was Wánshàn. Perfect!

If Little Hickshit had a rescue party coming for her, all he had to do was help her hide from the Poltergeist until Steve and his hair...and that skin...and the way the water from the shower rolled down abs to his hips and over his little, but well rounded ass...

Viens, Loga, sors ta tête du jeu. (Come on, Loga, get your head in the game)

"We don't need help. We can come back on our own. You don't even know—" He cut Erica off. She got too defensive like Mei too.

"If Harrington wants to come for her, tell him he better show as King Steve—" Billy coughed up some black blood. Bile. Máo (Gross). "Not that *pussy* he is *now*."

"You're...not OK." The girl said. No he wasn't.

"What the FUCK do you CARE?" He snarled. Fuck her.

"I got this, Big Cityshit." Erica said to him then turned to the girl. "You, weirdo friend of my brother's, *Carrie*, with bad hair and worse makeup, tell my mom that Billy needs a doctor. Girl Scouts don't give out surgery merit badges. *And* tell her I won't eat another asparagus casserole if she doesn't let him come over." Only Erica Sinclair would

demand something of a girl who can *throw* things with her *mind*. But, in what world would Vivian Sinclair let him *play* with her daughter?

"A compromise. I understand. I have to go, it's found me." And with she, along with the black liquid disappeared and they were back in the hospital.

"..."

"I don't like her. If she's friends with my brother then her head is probably filled with all that fantasy *nerd* stuff. She probably has one of those stupid walkies that chubby one blabbers on." She crossed her arms and it annoyed Billy that he knew which geekqueef she was talking about, the cabbage patch kid that latched onto Harrington like a fan boy. He crawled to a standing position. he still couldn't really feel his legs. They had to get....cover....

"Yeah, me neither. She's fucked in the head or somethi...." The floor tilted on him, he stumbled and swayed. His body shocked in pain and Billy just filled with anger and a bit of resignation. The irony of dying in a hospital wasn't lost on him.

Present Time

Billy smiled and finally exhaled one last time to see nothing but a warm, cradling white light behind his eyelids.

The warmth spread through his temples like a sunny day on the beach. The agony slipped and dimmed and the feeling came back to his legs and fingers. The stinging, lancing pain in his gut faded out finally and Billy sucked in air through his nose and filled his lungs. His ribs didn't hurt...and his ankle and the stab wound...there was hardly any pain at all.

His eyes flashed open and he saw Little Hickshit's eyes wide, and her breath blew out raggedly. Her hands were glowing, but not that crazy bright light, but a nice warm rainbow glow, like a gay pride lava lamp.

"You owe me a ticket to Nightmare on Elm Street aaaannnd a bag of

peanut M&M's." Erica Fucking Sinclair smirked so bright her hands stopped glowing. Ugh, debt is a debt.

"Fine. Tu ganes, you win, Girl Scout...I think your whacko Uncle Josue was right on the money about the voodoo priest healing." Billy murmured. He lifted his shirt in amazement, his wound was gone, no scar, and the bruises that peeked out from under his bandages from Neil were faded too. He could play a two on two basketball game and still have energy to pump iron.

"I guess so. Too bad Aunt Marion couldn't wake him up like I did you." Erica yawned. "Now, *I* need the nap." Erica Sinclair just gave him a new lease on life. He'd actually *carry* her like White Knight Steve Harrington to the pharmacy and tell her the bedtime story of when he stole an ambulance for that.

Notes:

Whaaaaaaaaaat.

Ok, so this was A LOT. Again this was a lot of plot and a lot of character set up and building. Obviously we are seeing a softer side of Billy here because he doesn't really have anything to prove, he is just trying to get Erica out. (and sort of confusing her for Max, at some parts showing might be what has with Erica may have been what he originally wanted him and Max to have together)

And yes, Twinkies. Because this chapter needed some damn humor.

Also. Yes, super powers because I can. I love El, but she shouldn't have to hog all the super powers. I tried to breadcrumb this in with Will being a bit...intuition/clairvoyant, but he isn't as strong because he was alone when he went up against the Mind Flayer, and this is a different sort of Evil and Erica and Billy fought it off together.

Also, Erica being protective and defensive of Billy is cute, and I like it. This does not mean that El and Erica will never be friends.

Also, keep in mind that just because Billy is 17 years old, does not mean that Bayani, Antoine, and Marcus were all the same age as him.

As the story progresses you begin to figure out the ages of his friends, and that they are also a bit protective of him because he is one of the younger people in his 'family'.

And remember, Maya and Baya are different people. You'll find out more about Jerry and Maya and what happened with Max, Mei and all of that later.

And yes, more information about mysterious Bayani! hehehe!

Also, Billy ate Easter candy on his birthday because he was born on an Easter Sunday and it became tradition. *symbolism*

Also, they mean partners like, partners in crime, not 'life partners'. Erica does not and will never have a crush on Billy. NOT EVEN SORRY.

I feel I am pretty crap at writing El. I am trying to get her vernacular down and to be honest, I am not even sure what she calls hop...so I just had her say Hop. If this is canon inaccurate I apologize. I tried to research it but I didn't really find anything. Also yes, Billy knows who Hop is, but doesn't know him by that name, or his name. This will be a joke later. Erica doesn't really address it because it's not on her mind.

Also, the song that Erica sings is a traditional Haitian song sung in Hatian Creole called Papaloko. The version sung by Toto Bissainthe is here:

/gGoLiAWJGsk

Song meaning, as best as I found is here:

Papaloko, you are the wind - That comes and goes - we are butterflies - The new features bring to Iemanjá - And whatever you say good - I expound And whatever you say bad - I expound - Papaloko, you are the mother - That comes and goes - we are butterflies - The new features bring to Iemanjá - Speak Papaloko, many words - Coming and going - we are butterflies - The new features bring to Iemanjá

Also, next chapter, rescue party arrives and they have WORK to do. Poor Steve. If you think the Caimans (demigorgons) are the biggest

thing they are going to fight, you'd be WRONG! Muahahahahahaha

That's it for my ramby author's note

Hope you enjoyed it!

:)

5. A Rising Tide

The Paper Knight and The Killing Tree

Chapter Five: A Rising Tide

"And you're *sure* this is the only place we can open the gate again?" Hopper asked El, well more like begged out of exasperation. Steve didn't want to be back here anymore than Hop did. Somehow, standing next to Neil's old Chevy pickup prickled the sides of his neck more than before.

Maybe it was because his limbs hung heavy like cement blocks due to fatigue. Maybe all the adrenaline had washed out of him and a pit of anxiety churned deep within him instead.

Maybe it was because of the conversation he had earlier with Max about Billy just...he didn't know...put the pressure on? Like the whole basketball game rode on his shoulders, but with a bit *more* at stake this time.

Thirty-ish minutes ago

Steve audibly groaned when he saw a blur of red hair in the passenger seat of his BMW. Susan had gone out and after several minutes came back in, saying that Max wouldn't come out.

She didn't say what had happened between them after Max had stormed out, but the utterly lost look on her face kinda told Steve that maybe she didn't know herself.

So.

Here he was doing the job that Nance should really be doing, but not doing because she had apparently had chosen his car to lock herself into. And this, of course, was some sort of signal that she wanted to talk to him, and not anyone else.

Personally, Steve thought she just chose his car because it was closest to the door. But Nancy had that 'don't argue with me' look carved on her

face, and Steve just gritted his teeth and trudged out to what was sure to be a stupid conversation.

Not even Lucas came out. He froze stiff. Some Dungeons and Dragons partner he turned out to be. Traitor. Leaving him to Max all by himself.

Steve shoved the key into the driver's side lock and twisted. Max didn't move an inch. No acknowledgment of his existence. He could have been invisible or as imaginary as the monsters he once thought were just spooky stories.

The bitter shards of anger roiled up inside him again as he slid behind the steering wheel and locked themselves in again.

He gripped the steering wheel tight with his left hand, white knuckles, but left his right unassumingly relaxed on the center console. Half of him tense with the urge to punch the horn, the other half relaxed, guard down to not set Max off.

Silence.

Max wordlessly wiped her eye that faced the passenger side window, face tipped towards the scenery.

"I hate him." She muttered thickly and lowly. "I hate him. He's so selfish, and mean, and...violent. He can't just do anything right, or good, or NICE." Max hissed like air from a slashed tire. Steve leaned his head back against the head rest.

"Yup." He couldn't argue with much of that. Billy checked all those boxes. The anger spiked in him again. God, Billy really fucked up this time. "A real piece of work." Steve added for no other reason than instinct.

"You don't even know him, Steve, so don't act so smug." Max twisted her body over to him, blue eyes scratching into his skin. He could care less if she was mad at him though.

Steve wasn't the best at reading people, but this wasn't THAT hard. She needed someone to talk to about Billy. Why him? He didn't know. He wished she chose Nancy. She'd be way better at this...we'll whatever this was.

"I think I know him pretty well. He doesn't sound that deep, Max. Sort of a... 'what you see is what you get' guy." Now, Steve swallowed knowing he was being unfair because it was a bald-faced lie. Steve didn't try to lie too often. He didn't like it, but it came in handy here.

Steve knew from day one Billy definitely NOT that kind of guy. He practically reeked of that 'You'll never figure me out' vibe.

Max snorted.

"Yeah, well maybe he is. Maybe he is just the... the worst. The worst everything." Max crossed her arms and stared down at the floor.

Steve sighed.

"Definitely the worst classmate I've had. And I've had class with guys who bragged about owning more than two yachts." Steve decided he may as well keep poking the bear, see when Max would either snap and go off about Billy or defend him. "Even worse than this one guy who would lift up girl's skirts, or this other guy who would steal purses and wallets out of gym lockers while we were in gy—"

"He almost got me killed back In L.A., so yeah, worse." Max snapped back and Steve's eyebrows furrowed. Yeah, that would definitely explain a lot.

"We could start a club, the 'Billy almost killed us, and he's the worst' fan club. We could make T-shirts." Steve smirked out and dryly chuckled. He heard some sort of noise from Max and turned to see her face scrunched.

"Like I'd be caught dead wearing a matching T-shirt with you." She wrinkled her nose, but Steve didn't follow up with anything.

Pause.

"Mei, the crazy girl, lied on the phone." Max propped her head in her hands, slumping over.

"Really, huh?" Steve didn't read her as a liar, but what did he know?

"She said Billy had two families. She's wrong, Billy doesn't sees me as a sister." Max's voice fired up hot.

Steve made a face.

"Last summer Billy taught me how to drive. We used to bet on this game, two lies and a truth. He usually won because I think he somehow cheated, but once he lost and he had to teach me to drive. Well, of course Mei found us on our last lesson, and told him to drop everything and stop Sang Hoon from doing something stupid. She told Billy that Bayani, the insane-o one that saw sounds, found 'the three' whoever 'the three' were. Well, we go to this shady house, and Billy told us to stay in the Camaro. But he grabbed his knife and I knew he was gonna do something dumb and illegal. I heard Billy scream even from inside the car, so I got out and went to go see... but I got grabbed by some guy and he dragged me into the house. The guy had a gun on me, and Billy had a knife to some guy's throat and Sang Hoon had a gun on some other one." Max stopped short and swallowed.

OK. So, that was like a hundred more words than he ever thought Max would say.

"Billy...was bleeding a lot from his right side, Sang Hoon's eye was messed up too. Billy could be so STUPID. One of the guys asked them if finding these guys was worth losing a sister over. Billy hissed back 'Fuck you, like I care.' It was then when Mei snuck up from behind and hit the guy who had me over the head with something. I got hit in the head too and everything got really blurry and nuts. Next thing I knew Marcus was driving Mei and I to the hospital. I didn't see Billy for eight days." Max murmured and Steve inwardly groaned. Think Steve, what would Nancy do here?

"He's not my brother. I don't care if he comes back." Max muttered; face scrunched up tight. It knotted Steve's gut.

Anger. Steve felt anger burn again, but it was...all wrong and unfocused. Before his anger pulsed because Billy messed up...but that had annoyingly faded.

He gripped the steering wheel vice-tight.

"You don't mean that." Steve said automatically and Max rose up in the seat. Steve thought for a second she was going to smack him.

"You don—" Max reared up, but Steve cut her off. He shifted and the paper crinkled in his back pocket. The three....

"Billy warned me about Lucas. He went to Indianapolis to bring back your mom to stop Neil. Billy... cares in his own twisted, ass-backwards way. I know he's a selfish, angry asshole, but maybe he might not've cared as much if Lucas wasn't close to you." Steve didn't really know where that came from.

Max pursed her lips and looked away.

Pause.

"I'm bringing Billy back. I still gotta punch his face in." Steve smirked, but it was mostly for show.

Max snorted.

"Whatever. Like I care." Max parroted Billy. "But...don't make promises you can't keep, Fishface." Max locked her eyes on his, and despite the nickname he could tell she was serious.

Maybe Max and Billy didn't think they were siblings, Steve didn't know much about that, but they kinda acted like it anyway.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, Max. Just don't call me that when Billy gets back, he'll be even more of a pain in my ass." Steve sighed, and with that Max opened the car door and paused.

"Not making that promise...when you see Billy tell him... nevermind." Max changed her mind and closed the car door leaving Steve slumped back into the car seat, lax.

He could do it. Steve rubbed the pendant in his pocket. He would bring Billy and Erica back. Will had been stuck for a week, and he came back.

He looked out the car window and saw a puddle of water. Pool. Barb.

He shifted again and paper crinkled, he almost forgot. Steve pulled out the faxed photo again and looked at the six people in it.

Sure enough, though it was dark and hard to make out, Billy's right side

was all dark and splotchy and Sang Hoon's eye was a swollen plum. If Billy could survive a life like that, he could suck it up another hour before they got there.

It had to have been the same day Max got hurt.

Billy owed it to Max to explain all this nonsense. He'd wrap the stupid bandages around his stupid wound himself, then drag him back by his stupid gold, curly mullet if he had to.

Present time

He had this though. He was King Steve and he would fight and do what it took to get them home. To get Billy back from hell...then give him his own version of hell.

God he was tired. And wired.

"Yes. *It's* softest here. Weakened." El pointed into the forest, of course in the direction of the Killing Tree and subsequent crime scene. Steve had hoped by now they had cataloged all the evidence and moved Neil's body. He turned around to see a stony faced Vivian Sinclair with her hands on her hips, shotgun slung around her shoulder.

Apparently her sister, Marion, had given it to her as a gift a while back and it was finally getting some use. Who the hell gives someone a *gun* as a present?

And Erica visits this Aunt *regularly*? Maybe there was more to the Sinclairs than he thought. His own dad had only touched guns in photo ops.

"We don't have all day, Hopper. You're the chief, just tell them to take a break from bagging up that bigot's body." Vivian gestured into the woods. Steve sighed, he didn't think bossing around Hop would work here.

Steve knew more about Hop through the geek patrol than anything first hand. He had, up until now, said like four different sentences to Mrs. Sinclair, and well, it's not like he and El hung out on weekends.

This was going to be such a *pain*.

"Hey now Vivian, I've been *patient*. I've been *flexible*, but you agreed when I let you come along that I would call the shots. I've been there, I helped get Will back, *I'm* in charge. If you can't follow my lead then you will be left behind. That goes for you too, kid," He shifted. "*and* you Jane." Hopper finally found his backbone and Steve put up his free hand and shrugged.

In his other hand he swung his nailbat loosely.

Mrs. Sinclair stiffened and nodded.

"I apologize, I got ahead of myself. You are the expert with this....Upside-down." Mrs. Sinclair admitted evenly. Steve knew she was having a hard time not pulling rank, but it was a relief to know she could shelve it for Erica.

"I don't know about *expert*, but we will get them back. We just gotta do this all together, and stick to the plan." Hopper started into the woods and Jane followed close behind.

The plan had already derailed when they accidentally left the box of masks behind. Then derailed again when they couldn't open a gate at the hospital or closer to it, but Steve wasn't about to point that out.

Steve yawned and trudged forward. He downed more coffee but it wasn't a cure-all from a night of no sleep and stress that shredded his focus and gut.

He could hear the snick of a lighter and see the way Billy looked away from him at the quarry.

'*Yeah, might just be that way.*' Billy just don't be an ass *for once*, and hang in there.

He heard Mrs. Sinclair behind him. She had ordered her husband to take Lucas, Max, and Susan to Indianapolis to Max's Uncle Ted's house under threat of 'A long and painful divorce'.

Steve was just glad he *didn't* have to babysit.

"You're a brave boy, very few people would risk their lives to save a friend." It was the first time she had *really* talked to him since the phone call.

"I couldn't live with myself if I let Erica be in the Upside-down and not try to get her back, Mrs. Sinclair." Steve replied and he heard a click, like a car door closing. He turned back as did Vivian, but they saw nothing. Steve was more on edge. It was definitely a mechanical click, not a branch snapping.

"Mmmhmmm. It has nothing to do with that boy, Billy, then? You said you cared when you spoke with his friends." She led and Steve bit out a harsh laugh.

"Because I had to, you heard how crazy his friends are. Billy and I are *not* friends, think the opposite. He *hates* me, mocks my entire *existence*, and I can't stand the price—jerk either. He doesn't deserve to die in the Upside-down, but I'm not doing this for him, Mrs. Sinclair." Steve knew that Max wouldn't have blabbed their conversation.

"Mhmm, well I'm thankful you're doing this just for Erica then. And call me Vivian. Saves time." Mrs. Sinclair's voice had that tone in it that Steve didn't like. She said it with the skepticism that she saw right through him. She also had that knowing stare his mother could get when he would lie about his grades.

It also really grinded his gears because he knew wasn't doing this just for Erica, but he couldn't say anything about that *now*.

He rubbed the pendant in his pocket. Billy and his *friends*? When hell froze over.

Steve knew he was so *fucked up* that he wanted Billy back so much when everyone else, save maybe Max, didn't care at all. Was this him being a pushover? Caring about someone when they clearly hated your guts?

No. Back that up.

He cared only because no one deserved to be stranded in the Upside-down. Not because of his messed up past, or whatever happened to

his boyfriend, or his screwed up stoner friends, or the way he deflated when he told him to die in a fire.

He didn't care that he made Billy *give up* on him and drive all the way to Indianapolis. It didn't matter anymore. It *didn't*.

He rubbed the pendant between his thumb and middle and index fingers anyway.

They walked a fair ways behind Hop, and he told them to stay put as he talked to the other two officers Steve didn't really know. Steve breathed a sigh of relief that Neil's body had already been moved.

His eyes caught on the dark and large Killing Tree. He remembered the slurping, stringy tunnel that had closed up right before Hop got to it.

If he had told Hop about Neil at Byers, would he have made it through in time?

Didn't matter anymore, he guessed.

Steve heard something like a stick snap behind him and he whipped around and again saw nothing. He needed to cool it; he'd be useless in the Upside-down if the hair on the back of his neck never went down.

"Steve." El quietly called him over and he shuffled through the dead leaves.

"Yeah?" Steve asked and she pointed to her chest.

"Be King Steve." Uhhh...ok El. Thanks?

"Trying. Trying." Steve gave a practiced smile. El smiled back, satisfied about something.

Wait. How did she know about *that*?

"OK, Jane, let's do this. Everyone remember the plan? I go in first and when I give the go ahead signal then you guys can come through. Don't forget, this is a stealth mission. Quiet." Hopper pointed a dirty

finger at all of them. Steve rolled his eyes. Like Steve would just sit on the other side of the gate and let Hop get eaten like Neil.

He commanded them like some sort of misfit SWAT team. Steve put a bandana over his mouth; he felt more like a kid playing Cowboys and Indians.

Steve figured if El said they would be alright, maybe the air wasn't as bad as Hop thought.

El put her arm out straight and furrowed her eyebrows. Her thin arm quaked and soon a football shaped opening parted. Steve immediately thought of one of those car crashes you couldn't look away from as the slimy strings stretched, parted and wheezed open.

Hopper got on his hands and knees and army crawled through the gooey, breathing tunnel. Mrs. Sinclair had her mouth in a tense line. Her stare could probably shatter marble.

"My baby went though *that*. Dear Lord." Vivian adjusted her grip on the shotgun as Hop disappeared into the Upside-Down. Steve held his breath.

Pause.

"Eggos!" That was the signal. Steve sighed through his nose. Here went *something*.

Mrs. Sinclair slung her shotgun over her shoulder and crawled through the tunnel like she had done it a few times before. Steve followed suit, he knew his hair was beyond salvaging at this point but he still winced when the top of his head touched whatever-the-fuck goo that oozed down. He heard El behind him shuffling right at his heels.

Steve got through and stood up, brushing his hands off on the denim of his now soiled jeans. He'd just burn these clothes later anyway.

The chill got to him first. It needled through his jacket, and he rubbed his hands on instinct. The cold wasn't a normal chill, Steve didn't really know how to describe it but it set him on edge.

Steve's breath caught in his lungs on instinct. Fluff puffed everywhere like those dandelions in the tunnels. Steve could taste the chalky mold though his red bandana, just how did Erica and Billy breathe this shit?!

Were they really as 'OK' as El said they were?

Steve then looked around. Grey. Nothing but bleak, grey death. Every nerve sprung to high alert and he couldn't think of a time he was more relieved to have his bat. Hopper had his gun and so did Mrs Sinclair....

Wait.

Wait just a damn minute.

Billy and Erica *weren't* prepared when they got taken, did they even HAVE weapons?

Steve's pulse jacked up double time. FUCK. He didn't even think about that!

"What is that?" He turned around, mouth dry to see Mrs. Sinclair poke a....carved apart Demodog. Damn. The thing was practically shredded apart.

"One of the creatures that lives here. Kids call em Demodogs..." Steve answered and wrinkled his nose. It smelled awful, like rotten apples and rancid meatloaf.

"They found a knife belt on Neil, guess we know who has the knife." Hop scratched the back of his head. Steve sighed deep, and his shoulders sagged (were they really that tense before?). Billy had the knife; he was armed.

Small miracles.

"Jane, let's close up that gate and move, we don't have a lot of time." Hop pointed back towards the street where his e23 and Hop's police SUV hopefully still sat parked. El put her hand out just like she did before.

Nothing.

In fact...Steve could hear the rustling and scraping of leaves and the slopping sound of goo. Something had started to scramble THROUGH it. They all tensed. Could one of the Demodogs had been stalking them from the street and followed them in?

Hop had his revolver pointed at the slurping entrance.

"Jane, dear..." Mrs. Sinclair motioned for her Jane to step back, shotgun still pointed at the ground. El didn't move, but her nose began to bleed.

'Plant your feet Harrington' Steve arced his trusty bat behind his right shoulder. King Steve wasn't just for show damnit.

"Gross, Gah!" No. No. NO. NO. Steve paused. He knew that voice and it made his blood run *cold*.

"DUSTIN!?" It was official, Steve Harrington was about to lose his goddamn *mind*. He dropped the bat at the same moment Hop lowered his gun and exhaled a shaky word that sounded suspiciously like fuck.

"Whew. I made it. Steve! You guys couldn't go alone, you need *at least* a six person party for this, and Lucas gave me his slingshot which he made me—" Dustin coughed "—call Wrist Rocket." Dustin was coughing on the toxic fluff floating around in the air and Steve's grip on the bat could probably choke a horse.

"DUSTIN! You're going *back*. This isn't some Dungeons and Dragons adventure! You can't be here. You're going back if El has to throw you back!" Steve dropped the bat to the ground. He was gonna shove and then kick his butt back through that tunnel. Just when he thought this day couldn't possibly get worse....

"STEVE! It's ok, my mom thinks I'm spending the night at you—" Mrs. Sinclair marched out and grabbed Dustin's ear like a Lioness would a cub.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow! STEVE!"

"Do you know how worried SICK your mother would be if she thought you were in this...HELL?! How worried sick I am over my Erica, and even over that other boy, who is *hurt*?! This is not a game, and you should be ashamed of yourself!" Vivian Sinclair's glare could probably broil a man to death. Poor Dustin. He messed with the one mother who could rival Joyce in a fight.

"Jane...Jane, Stop! We gotta get him back through!" Steve, Dustin, and Mrs. Sinclair all turned to see the gate shrink and pucker close again. Mrs. Sinclair hesitated in wrenching careless, stupid, dumbass Dustin back towards it because it was closing so fast!

"It's not me! *It's* closing it. Not me!" El sounded panicked and Steve sprang into action. Maybe he could brace it open with the bat? Worth a try. He scrambled to the oozing tunnel and jammed one end of the bat into the tunnel and right as he was about to brace the other end a bone rattling noise ripped through the air.

The hair on the back of Steve's neck pricked up and he probably did something pretty stupid. He yanked the bat back out and took a stance Mike Schmidt from the Phillies would be proud of. He sensed it behind him before he heard the beat of four legs on the ground, a Demodog. He pivoted sharp and swung hard.

He heard the whoop of someone behind him (Mrs Sinclair?) and he gritted his teeth as his nail bat connected and dug into something solid, thick, and heavy. He finally caught sight of it, a Demodog. Big. It sailed through the air and hit the ground a couple yards from him. Adrenaline and terror spiked in his system. What if there were more of them?!

Steve readied himself to swing again at it when Mrs. Sinclair nudged him aside, cocked her shotgun and blew a hole in its head with a blaring, echoing crack of her shotgun. His ears rang from the proximity of the shot.

Half its head exploded in a sloppy mess that almost got on his shoes. So much for stealth mission.

Sure it was gross, but... still. He was glad Mrs. Sinclair demanded she come with them. His own mother wouldn't have even made it to the

gate, much less take point in pushing him out of the way to kill a Demodog.

"I got more where that came from, mutt." Vivian Sinclair muttered as she put two more shells in her shotgun.

"Whoa Mrs. Sinclair that was totally cool. I can't wait to tell Luc—" Dustin stopped when Hop loomed over him and pointed to the gate that had now sewn itself closed.

"Happy?! ARE YOU HAPPY?! Now we have to worry about keeping you safe. NONE! None of this went according to plan. How did you even end up out here?!" Hop had put his gun away and ripped the bandana from his own face in rage. Steve bet he had his jaw set by the vein pulsing in his temple.

"Max called us on the walkie Steve took and left in his car." Oh, so THAT was the real reason Max chose HIS car. "Mike and I rolled a d20 and I got the higher roll, so here I am. Look. You need me, I know the most about the Demodogs, I have my notebook! Mike was freaking out about El going with *just* adults. Not that you're an *adult* Steve, that was Mike being *Mike*. I won't be in the way, you'll hardly know I'm here. Unless you nee—"

"STOP DAMNIT. Just...Stop. Jane can you open the gate back up again?" Hopper asked and Steve had gone through basically every calming exercise he could name, but he still wanted to shake Dustin like a maraca. Steve looked to El and the blood seeping out her left nostril.

"No. *It* knows. *It*...wanted us here." El pursed her lips and finally dropped her hands down to her sides, eyes cast downward.

"We're stuck here *too*?" Dustin asked, and Steve shrugged a bit.

"So much for the rescue plan." Steve muttered. Billy was dying, and they couldn't do anything to get him out.

What if Billy really *did* die here?

A chill settled in the base of Steve's gut.

Billy was *certainly* going to die here, and maybe he would too.

No. They'd figure something out.

"Oh no, we aren't. I came here to bring my baby back home and that's exactly what *I am* going to do. We are going to go get Erica and Billy, and we will find a way home." Mrs. Sinclair turned back to them, and Steve wanted to believe her. He really did, but out of all of them, she knew what they were going up against the *least*.

Pause.

"Vivian is right. We gotta go get Erica and Billy. We will figure out what to do from there. Let's get a move on, c'mon." Hopper gestured forward and Mrs. Sinclair rummaged through her pack and got a purple polka dotted hankie for Dustin who had begun to cough.

Steve caught El's stupid big, soft eyes. She looked like she could actually burst into tears. Probably tears of frustration. He got it, trying your best and your best just not being good enough.

It was practically his life.

"This isn't on you. If anything, it's on *me*. Alright? We got this." Steve whispered lowly, walking over to her.

She didn't reply.

Together they trudged through the nasty, creepy forest, all senses on high alert. El lagged a bit behind, clearly she was spent trying to open the gate again.

Steve just hoped the cars would be on the street.

His BMW and Hop's SUV sat there, but Steve grimaced. They looked like they had been sitting abandoned for years. It'd be a true miracle if the e23 started. It was due for a new ignition cylinder.

"Neil Hargrove's pickup is missing and there's broken glass over here. I'm guessing Billy busted into it and took off with it." Hopper announced and Steve pushed his hand into his pocket, feeling the pendant.

"More dead Demodogs!" Dustin tugged on Steve's jacket sleeve. Sure enough, what was left of two Demodogs lay like gutted in the street.

Dustin, of course, ran over to investigate. That kid was gonna grow up with *issues*. He hoped he didn't try to be something weird, like those people who stuff dead animals for people who went on safari. Davie's parents had a bunch of those African Savanna animals stuffed, like a zebra and a jaguar.

"Geez, Steve you're lucky he just hit you with a plate. These are all carved up and stabbed like, a million times. He better be on *our* side when we find him." Dustin pulled out his Dungeons and Dragons notebook and wrote something down. What, Steve didn't want to know.

Steve *definitely* wasn't impressed and weirded out that Billy managed to take out three Demodogs, maybe even two at once.

"He better be ALIVE when we find him." Steve huffed, opening his filthy driver's side door with his key.

He heard Dustin mutter something that probably wasn't something he wanted to deal with.

Steve wiped off the window and windshield with his sleeve as he heard Hop try starting his SUV.

Nothing.

"Son of a...the hospital is a good six miles from here!" Hop cursed and Steve heard him hit something. Steering wheel?

"Dustin will ya quit screwing around and get in my car? Hop hold up, I might know what's wrong." Steve needed everyone to not act like the world was ending.

Steve jogged over to the SUV and heard Hop crank it again. Clicking. It had to be one of two things, corrosion on the battery leads or the starter.

"Pop the hood. Hop, I think I can help." Steve didn't even realize he still had his bat until he propped it up against the wheel and lifted

the hood when he heard it pop open.

The engine was surprisingly clean. Not the battery. Starter. Maybe he could give it a good whack and something would *finally* go their way today.

Steve closed the hood carefully, not to make any extra sound, which was probably useless at this point. He heard some heavy footsteps. Hop.

"Got a hammer or a big wrench? It's probably the starter." Steve squatted down to the sticky asphalt. He might just have to buzz his hair off after this. His mother would probably cry. He pushed the bandana over his face to cover his hair instead. Better than nothing.

Hop handed him his police flashlight. That could do. Steve wrinkled his nose as he went on his back and shimmied up the tacky pavement towards the cylinder shaped starter.

Steve gave it a couple good hard whacks. He wished he had taken his bat with him up underneath the car with him, even if it wouldn't do him much good.

"Try her now Hop!" Steve hollered and immediately regretted it. What if there were more Demodogs out there?

Steve jumped and banged his head on the undercarriage when the v8 rumbled to life. Maybe he was getting the hang of cars after all, *everyone* banged their head after fixing a car.

Steve began to wriggle out from under the SUV when something quick caught the corner of his eye.

Steve dropped the flashlight and edged his hand towards the side of the SUV to where his bat stood propped upright. C'mon... almost...

"HYYYYYYYYYSHHHHHHAA. " A snarling pit of razors sprung at him and sliced him up his left forearm, shredding through his jacket. Steve fisted his hand on instinct and wrenched it back.

"Shiiiiiiiit!" Steve shouted, banging his wrist into the strut of the wheel. That fucking *hurt*. JESUS.

He was SO *fucked*. He was bleeding straight through his ruined jacket already. The pain jolted up his arm as he wriggled away from the claws scrabbling at him.

Some rescuer he was turning out to be....DUSTIN!

Steve heard the crack of a gun. The Demodog backed off and Steve made his move to edge out from under the running SUV and grabbed the bat with his right hand.

His left arm was throbbing, but he could swing just fine with just his right. He saw El leaning up against the SUV, struggling to throw back the Demodog launching itself against his BMW. Dustin was curled up in the passenger seat, trembling, fumbling with Lucas' slingshot.

They couldn't rely on her mind powers all the time, she was gonna tire out. Steve broke into a sprint. He couldn't let the Demodog get to Dustin.

Batting practice.

Steve moved fast and low. Right as the Demodog whipped around, Steve cracked the bat across its peeling head.

Grand Slam!

The adrenaline pumped through his veins and he gripped the bat with both hands this time. He clubbed it over and over, aiming for its head. His fear and fury almost made his teeth pierce through his bottom lip.

It made a gurgling, squealing noise that almost made Steve feel bad for it if it didn't slice his arm to hell.

Blood ran down his hand onto the bat making it red, sticky, and something even more out of a horror movie. Steve's whole body shook by the time he realized that two Demodogs had attacked them, not just one, and he pulped the one that *didn't* slice him up.

Good teamwork, he supposed.

"Steve you gotta teach me how to do that. Whoa your arm! Steve

you're all cut up and we *just* got here!" Dustin exclaimed, climbing over the seats, probably getting them all gooey and filthy.

"NO, and how about a thank you? Huh? Ingrate." Steve rolled his eyes, Dustin may be his worst critic. Well, next to Billy.

He checked his pocket, he still had the necklace. He rubbed it.

"Steven, thank you for getting the car started. We need to bandage your arm, and I may as well put my rusty nursing skills to good use." Mrs. Sinclair slung the shotgun over her shoulder. Wouldn't the barrel be too hot? Guess she didn't care.

"You're a nurse?" Steve asked out of curiosity making his way to his own car and tossed the keys to Dustin. "Try the engine, just *don't* drive it." Steve pointed. He doubted the e23 would start, which is why he gave the keys to Dustin: to occupy him.

"Studied Nursing for a semester or so at Oakland University, but dropped out and moved to Hawkins with Howard when his parents took a turn. Then I had Lucas and Erica and the rest is ancient history." Vivian Sinclair explained, Hop was studying El, probably making sure she didn't have a real brain bleed or something.

"Yeah, thanks kid for your help with the truck, you're not too bad with cars." Steve pushed down a small sense of pride. It felt weird to get praise from Hop like he was a father figure. His own father would just shake his head in disbelief that he was doing manual labor, which was for people *beneath* him.

"Just call me 'mechani—" the e23 actually started, Steve stared at it in shock. Of course that stupid, haywire car starts *here*, everything is backwards. *Upside-down*. Dustin better not even think about trying to drive it...

Mrs. Sinclair came up to him with the first aid kit and grabbed his wrist. Steve winced when she pushed up the jacket sleeve.

His arm looked *thrashed*.

"It looks worse than it is. It got you across the arm, you're lucky." Mrs. Sinclair began to wipe down his arm with the disinfectant that

STUNG. Steve pulled back his arm and motioned to his car.

"Billy needs the help right now. Not me. We've got to get going." Steve reminded them. Mrs. Sinclair sighed and smiled in a way that confused Steve. Hop nodded and Mrs. Sinclair, El, and Hop all made their way to the Chevy. Steve made a face at Dustin and he scrambled over to the passenger seat.

Steve got in, arm still stinging and throbbing, but at least he wouldn't get some sort of toxic infection. Like gangrene...or whatever people got when they got cut. Scurvy? No, that was the pirate one. Tetanus.

Steve waited for the Chevy to pull out and followed it, running over one of the dead Demodogs for good measure.

Steve's mind itched with guilt as blood slowly dripped from his arm onto the seat of his car. Had they wasted too much time?

Nothing had gone the way it was supposed to. When El rested up, could they even get out of here?

They had driven a ways, maybe five or so miles, and so far nothing crazy. Steve doubted they had seen the last of what the Upside-down had in store for them. This was the calm before the storm.

Steve couldn't hear anything beyond the rumble of the BMW's engine and the Chevy cruising equally fast in front of them. Oh, and Dustin (completely uninvited guest) squirming in the passenger seat.

"You know those things can smell blood right, so your arm is totally a liability. I told everyone that I'd make sure you wouldn't get eaten, or beat up by Billy again and you're making my job harder." Dustin finally spoke up just to sass him. The nerve.

"Don't even *start* with me, Dustin. If you think I'm not pissed at you for the stunt you and Max pulled, and somehow sneaking into the Upside-down you're... well you're goddamn out of your mind. Just do me a *favor*, FOR ONCE, and keep a look out...it's too quiet." Steve cautioned, gripping the steering wheel.

"Max told me you promised to bring Billy back. She doesn't believe you *can*, and I don't get why you *would*. He's a total jerk jock-brain,

and not worth *you* coming HERE. Mrs. Sinclair, Hop, and El could have brought back Erica on their own." Dustin muttered, clearly sulking. Was that was this whole thing was about? Why he conspired with Max and hid in his car?

Fucking *hell*.

"Well, you're both probably right. He's most likely dead if he is bad off as El says, and because of much time we've wasted. *Groovy* right?" Steve bit out, exhausted and irritated. He didn't get why everyone was so up in his business.

"... you think so?"

Oh, he actually got that *heavy* didn't he?

He remembered the punch he threw at his ribs back at the quarry, and how Billy winced and backed off. He was already real banged up real bad by Neil before he even got to this hell.

'*Go die in a fire*' His stomach churned even trying to wrap his head around Billy being devoured just like Neil.

"...It honestly wouldn't surprise me." Steve murmured softly.

Then something up ahead caught his eye, mountains of asphalt punched up out of road. Did Billy drive through this?

Steve swerved by one, wooden spikes like massive thorns grew out of the asphalt. Roots, maybe just like the tunnels he and the runts had crawled through.

An icy sense of dread drenched his whole body, and numbed him despite the lancing pain in his arm.

Steve spotted dark skidmarks across the pavement... Billy had been avoiding these like they were chasing him. Steve didn't know how he could have possibly navigated between them while they were coming. He could barely manage when they were already there.

Then he saw it ahead. A crumpled heap of twisted metal and the SUV came to a screeching halt.

El scrambled out of the passenger seat of the SUV to what was left of the pick up and Steve put his car into park and grabbed his bat.

"Stay. Put. Don't fucking argue with me." Steve glared and didn't bother waiting for Dustin to protest as he got out of his car and slammed the door.

Steve's senses were heightened as he approached the truck. It looked like a smashed can, except for a huge chunk taken out of the engine.

Something had crushed or maybe even cut, straight through the engine block. Not much could do something like that.

"Steve. *It* did this." El had her hand out as if feeling for something in the air. Beside him Mrs. Sinclair picked up something. A shoe. Small. Probably Erica's.

"What is *it* El? What can *it* do?" Steve plunged his hand in his pocket and fumbled with the necklace. Damn nervous habit.

"*It's* the Master. It... can do what I do. He's... stopping me." El pursed her lips.

That was a game changer. Steve swallowed.

"We're close to the hospital, they... yeah there's a blood trail over here. They must have walked through the woods." Hop's flashlight landed on a bloody boot print. Then another, another, then a puddle.

Jesus.

Steve muttered something, couldn't say what because he was done wasting time. He rushed back to his car, heart pounding in his chest. His thoughts ran wild.

Billy had fought against a telekinetic Demigorgon, and lost too much blood. A telekinetic Demigorgon that could slice through a car engine block! Erica somehow got knocked out of her sneakers, and Billy was dying and he just couldn't be too little too late again.

'*You're a Paper Knight, Harrington.*' NO he WASN'T.

He was gonna keep his promise. King Steve delivered when he said he would.

Steve ignored Dustin's yammering questions, which he didn't feel too guilty about, and gunned the accelerator around the wrecked pick-up making a hard right down the road that led to the hospital.

"Steve! SLOW DOWN." Dustin pointed at something, but Steve didn't care. Steve braked hard and parked the BMW crooked beside an ambulance. He got out of the car and then saw what Dustin was pointing at.

Or rather *who*.

A shock of curly blond hair caught his attention next to the hood of the ambulance. Billy stood leaning against it, denim jacket open, revealing what was left of his shirt tied up in a knot right under his pecs.

Instead of his normal jeans, Billy was wearing hospital scrubs that were cut off around the ankles.

Billy flicked his wrist in a singular wave of acknowledgement like did when they were forced to be on the same team for basketball practice.

He wasn't too late!

He wasn't too late, and Billy looked *good*.

He had no idea what to think.

Steve got out of his car as he heard the rumble of the SUV park behind him.

Billy looked ten thousand percent OK. All pissed glances, six pack abs, and devil-may-care body language.

"Welcome to hell, Harrington. Would you and your *fanboy* like a table for two?" Billy jutted his chin at Dustin who had just gotten out of the car.

Steve didn't realize his jaw was slack open till he closed it.

"*Really*, you're cracking jokes you dick!? Here's one, I'm gonna take your one dollar ass and make change with it. El told us you were dying, the blood... wait was that actually Erica's?!" Steve didn't think those were her footprints and they found one of her shoes.

A look flashed across Billy's face before it turned into a dark grimace.

"No. She's fine, Harrington, she's asleep on one of the beds. Go see for yourselves, I got something *important* to do." Billy set his jaw and shoulders and turned around to the front of the ambulance.

"ERICA?! Baby, Mama's here!" Mrs. Sinclair called out and ran into the hospital with Hopper on her heels.

Steve, again against his better judgment, followed Billy out and around the ambulance.

"Hey, Hargrove—" In a flash Billy darted into his path, blue eyes like lasers.

"Don't CALL me THAT." Billy snapped, nostrils flared, knife glinting in his hand. "Not *anymore*. Got it, amigo?" He put the knife back in some sort of makshift holster made from gauze.

"OK, amigo." Steve didn't mean to rile him up and remind him of Neil. Wait. "We saw the blood on the road, and all your bruises... they're all gone. What exact—"

"Are you fucking *kidding* me?! Are you seriously telling me you wanted me to be all fucked up? Harrington, I know you told me to DIE in a FIRE but the gall to actually be disappointed that I didn't? You're *fucked up*." Billy reacted by shoving Steve into the side of the ambulance. Steve winced and hissed not because of the shove, but his injured arm hit the wheel well.

A dark guilt festered in him, he *never* wanted that, and that's *not* what he meant.

Out of nowhere a pebble hit Billy square in the chest.

Dustin had the slingshot in one hand, and a bigger rock in the other.

"Leave Steve alone! You're wrong about Steve, he's awesome! You're the screwed up one." Steve groaned, he didn't need Dustin defending him or saving him from Billy. He could handle him on his own.

"Stay out of this Cabbage Patch, the adults are talking." Billy had that look in his eyes like he was holding back, but still looking for a fight. "Babysitter *extraordinaire* brings his teacher's pet with him to hell. Good fucking job, A plus grade work there, King Steve."

Steve sneered and shoved Billy right back, leaving a bloody handprint on his dirty denim jacket.

Billy's eyes widened.

"And you're already sliced up. Shit in a fight with those Cujos too I guess." Billy's gaze lingered on Steve's bloodied arm a fraction too long.

Steve's temper hit a boiling point and he rocked back and cracked Billy across the jaw.

Yes!

"You're such an intolerable, ungrateful *prick*. But you know, this is on me, I don't know what else I should have expected. I can't..." Steve shook out his fist.

'Believe I'm here for you, I gave a shit, I raced here thinking you could be dying, got called Fishnets by your loser friends....no...'

"... can't believe you were *right*. I *should* listen more. Listen to what everyone else says about *you*." Steve knew his point hit home when he saw Billy pause in nursing his jaw.

"Nice one, Steve!" Dustin pointed and smiled and Steve wanted the ground to eat him up. He really didn't need a cheerleader.

"I'm usually right, Harrington. Get used to it." Billy quipped back, but it lacked a lot of heat. Steve then saw El come up.

"You were hurt, someone helped you?" El pointed to a spot on Billy's exposed torso. El always kinda had that 'space cadet' facial expression, but her brows were furrowed in intense confusion. Like when Mike tried to explain the school cafeteria, or if someone told her Eggos didn't exist anymore.

"Don't know what you're talking about." Billy clipped back.

"Friends don't lie." El immediately responded.

"Let's set the record straight, Redrum, none of your three ring carnies are *my* friends." Billy winked mean and walked back behind him and picked up a heavy box.

'Yeah, your friends are a real treasure, *ass*.' Steve thought, and almost said, but then remembered he wasn't supposed to *know* them.

"Hey, don't talk to her that way, and what you doing with all that, *son*?" Hop came striding over, full cop mode. Mrs. Sinclair had Erica's hand in hers. Erica looked like she was still waking up, and her hair was all messed up. She looked sort of out of it and roughed up, but otherwise totally fine.

Billy *really had* made sure she was alright.

"Unfinished business." Billy replied cryptically and walked around with the box on one hip to the passenger side of the ambulance and opened the door and put the box in. The ancient, baggy nursing scrubs didn't flatter him, not that he was really looking *that* hard.

"That's not going to cut it. We stick together. I don't want to hear a bunch of *attitude*, and *lies*. Erica here says you both managed to bring down two of those... man shaped creatures on your own. What *really* happened here?" Hop's exhaustion was starting to show, but Steve rocked back on his heels. Three demodogs, ok, Steve could see Billy taking those out.

But that creature he fought in Jonathan's house?

Steve remembered Nancy shooting it, they caught it on fire in a bear trap and it *STILL* didn't die. Steve remembered hitting it over and over and it reacted like he had patted it on the back. The dark, cold

terror of facing one of those things again still kept him up at night.

No way Billy could kill two with just a KNIFE.

"Wait, Billy and Erica killed two Demigorgons?! NO WAY." Dustin asked and Steve studied Billy's reaction.

"Uhhh, YES WAY loudmouth. Billy and I killed both of the El Caimans by *ourselves*. I'm not gonna waste my time lying to my momma, cuz she always knows when I do." Erica snapped awake instantly, all over Dustin. Mrs. Sinclair made no move to correct her, did her mother really believe her after seeing those things?

"They're called Demigorgons, not Caimans. They're not even reptiles! See, Steve this is exactly why you need me here." Dustin and Erica were definitely not going to get along. And no, Steve didn't care what they called them, he just knew he didn't want to see more of them.

"Cool it Dustin, How did you kill two of them, and where are you going Billy?" Steve moved to in front of the drivers' seat of the ambulance and El shadowed him. Steve wasn't about to let Billy drive off on some suicide run.

"What do *you* care, huh?" Billy turned, eyes wild. He locked his gaze onto Steve's like he wanted to burn him. "You came to get Erica home, right? Then go. DO IT." As quick as Billy amped up his glare he turned it to Steve's arm, then to Hop. "Hey, Chief of Bumfuck, Patch up *King Steve* while you're at it before he passes out, and *get lost*. Get back to your simple hick lives in your little hick town, and leave me *be*." Billy made a move for the ambulance door, but was stopped when Steve posted up in front of him.

'Plant your feet, Harrington.' Oh he was planting them alright.

"This isn't adding up, jackass. What's making you want to STAY here?!" Steve snapped and set his stance and balled his fist ready for another swing.

Billy tongued out his bottom lip, as if trying to think of something to prevent him from laying Steve out.

"You're going after *it*. The Master?" El asked.

Billy's blue eyes flashed like sparks.

"Payback's a bitch, and I'm the one holding the leash. The Kingpin's *mine*." Billy grinned one of his typical crazy grins at El, but she didn't seem phased.

"You're not going without me. We're *partners*. You need me for back up." Erica piped up, putting her hands on her hips. Partners?

"This was always the plan, Erica. Your mom, and these circus freaks are here to take *you* home." Billy's voice notably softened in tone when he talked to Erica... wait. Were they *friends*?

And Billy thought they only came for her... was that what he was so bent out of shape over!?

"Son, you're coming with us back to Hawkins. No debate." Hop definitely had his 'I'm through with this bullshit' expression on.

"Oh, you gonna cuff and book me, Johnny Law? I'd like to see you catch me. When was the last time you ran somewhere? To get the last pack of Ding-Dongs from the Seven Eleven?" Billy taunted. Why did he *always* have to look for a fight?

Erica stifled a laugh, and her mother bapped her on the head lightly.

"Billy get serious. This thing is strong enough to stop El. You can't—" Steve paused because Hop's face was flushed purple with rage.

His hand twitched like he wanted to reach for his gun.

"I know you think you're tough *son*, but you're NOT as tough as you think. You can't possibly know what's out there and I am not letting a punk like you endanger us any longer. You're getting in the car if I have to force you." Hop's voice sounded like a boulder hitting a brick wall.

Billy tensed then laughed.

"Punk like me...because you know me soooo well by now, huh, five-oh? Sure, come on, *hit* me. I *know* you want to. Here, right where Harrington slapped me. Knock me down, drag me into your car.

Wouldn't even be the first time for me this week. BUT, against *you*, I'll put up a fight. You aren't my *old man* and nothing about *you*, SCARES *me*. It won't be over quick, and by then those Cujos and El Caiman will be back. So, *instead*, how about you stop wasting time, and stay out of my way." Billy had lost his goddamn mind, his eyes had gone bright and he had his jaw high and out like he was asking to be knocked out.

"Billy, you need help, and you're gonna get it if I have to drag you back to Hawkins to get it." Hop squared up and Steve got in between them.

Steve wasn't sure how he could talk this one down, he just knew he wasn't on either side.

"The both of you stop this nonsense." Mrs. Sinclair's voice pierced the tension. "Billy, thank you for keeping my Erica safe." OK Steve didn't see that one coming. "Erica has vowed to not eat my casseroles again unless you come over to our house. Your macho-man attitude is not going to make my cooking go to waste, so you're coming back with us." Did Mrs. Sinclair just invite Billy over to her house for dinner while they were stuck in the Upside-down?!

Billy opened his mouth but instead froze and closed it again. Did he hear something?

He slowly put out a hand, eyes darting almost back behind him, towards the street. In a few long strides Billy had crossed to the faded double yellow line in the middle of the street, Steve followed him out, matching his gait.

No one said a word or moved for what seemed like months. Steve itched for his bat but it was in the e23. So much for backing Billy up.

A hiss and what Steve thought was a whisper of something he didn't understand sounded from across the road, deep in the woods.

"Fuck you, too." Billy growled out mostly to himself.

"Are you talking to it?" Steve asked and Billy turned back to him, eyes dark and pressed something into his hand. Billy's fingers burned

into his, like he had a fever. Unnatural, the cold had chilled Steve's fingers to the bone.

"Back the fuck up, Harrington." Billy pushed him, but Steve had planted his feet.

Steve recognized what he had in his hand, a syringe of something.

The forest whispered something else.

"Neowa ssauneungeoya!" OK, Billy just spat the weirdest French he had ever heard.

The voice from the forest laughed then the woods lightened, as if they had been shrouded in some sort of dark, foggy shadow the whole time.

"Should I get my bat?" Steve suggested and Billy shook his head, and slowly, steadily drew his knife.

"The Master is planning. We should stay. Plan too." El spoke up, he had no idea she had gotten so close.

"You want us to stay, in the hospital?!" Hop hollered half a basketball court back, gun drawn.

"Well, where else should we go Hop? El needs to rest to open a new gate, you look like hell, and if this...Master is just watching us what's the harm in resting up?" Steve angled, honestly he was dead on his feet from everything. He to get some sleep, bandage his shredded, throbbing arm, and get away from both Billy and Hop.

"Fine. *Damn*. But just until Jane gets strong enough to open a new gate, then we are *out of here*." Steve pitied Hop a little. It's not like all of this was in his job description.

"Steve I'll go get us beds. We need to discuss tactics." Dustin set off inside clumsily, making too much damn noise.

He followed Dustin in, needing space. And almost immediately Mrs. Sinclair took to fixing up his arm.

The whole time Erica just watched, as if trying to figure him out like a puzzle. She and Lucas had a bit more in common than he realized.

"So you're *Steve*, the high school senior that hangs out with my brother and his geek friends. I don't get you. Guess your hair's ok." Erica crossed her arms in front of her as if he somehow just offended her by existing.

"In the flesh. High school senior by day, babysitter by night, good hair always." Steve joked, but she just scrunched her face up.

"I don't see what *he* sees in you." Erica cocked her head to the side and Steve shrugged.

"I think your brother sees me as a ride, and maybe a good swing, other than that, not much." Steve knew that Lucas didn't really like him as much as Dustin or Will did. He liked him better than Mike though, but he did call Mike, Nancy once.

"Woowowow. You're *slow*." Erica rolled her eyes and walked away. Um...what did he miss?

"Good as you're going to get. You're lucky it didn't hit an artery. You should go talk some sense into Billy and get him back inside." Mrs. Sinclair did a damn good job. It made him wonder if she could still be a nurse.

Steve looked for an out, but Dustin, of course, was already passed out asleep on one of the beds. Maybe the kids had been up all night too. *Damnit*. Why did he have to be peacekeeper?

"Easier said than done, thanks." Steve replied tiredly and used the scissors to cut off the shredded part of his green jacket. He trudged out the front doors of the ER, past the two destroyed Demigorgons.

They really had killed both of them. They were both scorched, blistered, and completely carved up. How did Billy come out unscathed?! How did Erica?!

He put his hand in his jacket pocket on instinct, the syringe...

Billy was leaning up against the ambulance again, not smoking,

which surprised Steve. For some reason, nervousness tingled at his sides.

"Fuck off, Harrington. Go get your damn beauty sleep." Billy flat-lined, not bothering to look Steve's way. He still studied the treeline across the road, knife still death-gripped his hand.

Whatever the Kingpin was, it was obviously still out there.

"Someone as pretty as me can wait. The syringe. What's it filled with?" Steve plunged his hand in his pocket and pulled out the syringe. He put it in the same pocket as the necklace.

Billy glanced his way, almost cautiously.

"Ketamine. Horse tranquilizer and 'party' drug. Guess who gave me that idea." Billy gestured injecting a syringe into his neck.

"...that night, those Demodogs came for the kids. You were mixed up in it, and pounded my face in, a real 'party' drug." Steve made a face.

"I kinda put that together, Harrington. You weren't playing 'voodoo rituals', you were trying to protect the geeks and my...Max." Billy shifted, still avoiding Steve's eyes.

Whoa, now that would probably be as close to a 'Billy Har—Loga apology' he'd *ever* get.

"I promised her I'd bring you back home. Even if just to kick your ass as payback." Steve chuckled a bit, but Billy stilled.

Billy's eyes widened to globes then narrowed venomously.

"You're in *trouble*, don't let her near your nail-bat. She takes promises seriously." Billy muttered. Steve rolled his eyes, Billy was going to make this promise hard, wasn't he? Steve shivered. He didn't know how Billy wasn't shivering like he was. He itched his exposed bandage. He also wished he didn't have to trash his clothes because of the blood...wait.

The scrubs. The bloody footprint. The blood would have totaled his jeans if it got that much on the asphalt. Billy had to change his pants.

"You owe me some answers this time. I busted my ass all the way here, and you did deck Jonathan in the face when he saved you." Steve turned to face him and Billy narrowed his eyes in challenge.

Pause.

"Byers is a voyeuristic stalker with daddy issues who got what he deserved....You get two questions. Make 'em count, *your majesty*." Billy tongued out his bottom lip. That was easier than he thought.

"You were definitely hurt, how did you get better?" Steve asked suddenly, maybe he should have thought the first one through better.

"Voodoo Priest sang me a song about butterflies and used rainbow magic to heal me. One left." Billy grinned like this was a fucking game. Oh, this is probably what it was to him, just some *game*. Ugh. He did play that game with Max: one truth, two lies.

Figures he would ask a pretty straight forward question and get some bullshit as an answer...then again, they were in the Upside-Down. Maybe good things were possible here too. But still *voodoo*?

Wait, Didn't Billy say the drawings in the Byers' house looked like voodoo? If the Upside-Down could be like Dustin's Dungeons and Dragons game, maybe it could be like voodoo too? Could be possible... he supposed.

Nah. Billy was just being Billy.

"Someone got high on his own supply.... I'll phrase this one better. What did you say to that shadow thing in the woods?" Steve crossed his arms this time, hopefully enforcing how serious he was.

"I've never touched," Billy slapped the inside of his elbow with two fingers. "Not. Once." Billy paused, scrutinizing Steve for what Steve didn't know. "I told the Kingpin that his fight was with *me*."

"You're literally picking fights with a shadow-god. And people call me stupid...Jesus, Billy. It can throw a Car with its *mind*." Steve turned around, completely dumbfounded. His friend Mei had him pegged to a T. What a completely reckless moron provoking what was the God of this place.

"Yeah, I know Harrington, I was THERE, It can *eat* them too. It's still a fight I can win if I play it *just* right." Billy wrinkled his nose. "sides why do *you* care anyway?" Billy lowered his gaze to a pebble beside him and kicked it well into the street. This mirrored what happened at the quarry, only that time he hit his windshield.

He stepped up to Billy to as close as they had been next to the ambulance, but the anger had faded to just a tired, weak ash in Steve's chest.

Billy was either delusional or suicidal, and Steve didn't *get* it. Did he really believe that *no one* wanted him back? Even if he thought that about the Hawkins people, his friends in LA (despite how they argued) legitimately *cared* about him.

Mei's shrieking into the phone was branded into his eardrums.

Well, guess he'd have to be the one to prove *someone* cared. And he could too. He just didn't get why HE had to do ALL work all the TIME.

He slipped the syringe back into his jacket pocket and pulled out the pendant.

"Picked this up from around the Killing Tree this morning before the cops rolled in. I figured you'd want it back." Steve held it out by its chain and Billy's eyes flew too wide and too blue.

Steve didn't know how he held his gaze as he stared right back at him. Steve's throat kind of swelled up, but he wasn't gonna back down and say anything. It was Billy's turn to say shit.

Billy pursed his lips, Steve could smell the smoke from his brain going into overdrive.

"Taking evidence from a crime scene is a crime, King Steve. Should I tell our good friend Chief Junkfood?" Billy's joke and voice sounded thick and swollen. Steve jingled the chain.

"It's important to you, right? I mean I could just sell it, or give it to a girl." Steve waggled an eyebrow, bit Billy didn't really register it. At least Steve didn't think so because he had zoned out on his arm.

"Like you would, but...Keep it for now. You'll need it." Billy recovered with a slight smirk.

"Unlike you, I don't need jewelry to round-out my *look*." Steve fired back.

"Ha, it's not hard to look good in Hawkins, Steve, not that you can even do *that* right." Steve's eyebrows must have hit his hairline. Did Billy just call him by his first name? Steve decided to let the insult slide (because it's not like he always lived in Hawkins, and he knew he looked good in Massachusetts) as he looked at the pendant.

It was old and worn down, which made sense it was his mother's (Which he wasn't supposed to know). It had some person on it, (maybe it was an angel?) stabbing something on the ground. The words around the top and bottom had faded but he could still make out:

'Saint Michael the Archangel, Defend us in the Battle'

"It was my grandmother's then my mother's. St Michael is the Patron Saint of Warriors. Cela vous protégera." Billy snorted and from the accent, Steve guessed he said something in French.

"You don't have to say something in French to sound *smart*. I know you're in AP French, Nance told me." Steve recovered, thinking of the photo in his head. It still blew his mind how *small* Billy was, and how much *fun* his mother looked. What happened to her? She had to be dead for Billy to be shipped off to Neil. A chill ripped up Steve's spine.

"Slipped. The class is an easy A. Teacher's a drunk." Billy tried to shrug it off, but Steve could tell he was uneasy, like he didn't like being called out on it.

"Not for Nance, she HAS to study hard for that class." Steve really took in Billy. He was bouncing on his toes like he wanted to escape. *Uneasy*. Billy threw up more walls to him than his parents did to each other.

"I don't *cheat* if that's what you're getting at. Maybe I'm just good at

it, that so much of a *surprise* for you? Or maybe your perfect princess Wheeler isn't as smart as you, or she thinks she is. Pick your poison, Harrington." Billy bit back, angry as a snake. What in the hell!? It was meant as a compliment, sorta.

Steve huffed. What was he even DOING?!

"Fuck you, man. I'm a moron for thinking you could have a decent conversation without getting pissy and defensive. Shoulda listened like *you* said." Steve pointed at him and slipped his hand in his back jeans pocket and felt paper. That photo of Billy, Bayani, and Sang Hoon. He still had it! *Fuck!* He definitely couldn't let anyone see it. Especially Billy. Especially *Dustin*. He'd have to think of a way to throw it away, except he kind of didn't want to.

Billy tensed, and Steve half expected him to swing, guess the half-assed conversation was over. Suddenly he felt like his body got hit by a pillowcase filled with bricks. He fought a big yawn.

"Stop." Billy suddenly snatched the necklace from Steve.

"Don't lose this, *King Steve*, I'll take it back later." Billy maneuvered like a rolling wave off the ambulance to be within mere inches of Steve's face.

Steve and Billy had technically been this close before, like when they guarded each other in basketball. BUT. This was different because this was the Upside-down and time stood *still*.

Steve, dumbstruck, just stood there as Billy widened the silver chain.

The eye contact they had made his gut clench heavy and his mouth dry out light. He envied Billy's poker face because he didn't show any emotion *at all* and he was sure he looked like a deer in the headlights of a car.

Steve didn't move a muscle, he could have been made of stone like in a museum. He could make out a faded, jagged scar across Billy's forehead, and another along his jaw. Steve didn't even breathe because Billy, smooth as silk, just looped the long, strong chain around the crown of his head and dropped it around his neck.

The pendant thumped warm right in the center of his chest.

Steve glanced down at it for a split second then back up to the unreadable Billy. Steve licked his lips.

"I'm good at them. Languages. Freebie." Billy cleared his throat, and Steve pretended not to watch his adam's apple bob up and down.

"Yeah, ok." NICE. Way to be *articulate* Steve!

Steve's heart rate revved up like the tachometer in his e23 when he floored it out of the Byers' driveway. The skin between his ears and his collarbone burned hot, intense. His gut swam warm and tingly, and...

HOLY SHIT he was *not* turned on!

He was *not* fucking AROUSED by Billy putting some old necklace around his neck. No, he was exhausted, that's ALL this was.

Besides...friends did *this*. Friends put jewelry on each other *all* the time.

He helped Tommy find that lost cufflink for junior prom.

He helped Davie once...no Davie was *different*....he wasn't going to think of him right *now*.

Wait.

SHIT were Billy and him *friends* now?! Why, just WHY, did Billy do THAT?! Did he do it just to mess with him? Is this what his friends did out in Cali? Was this a *California* thing?

Steve's throat sewn itself shut so couldn't say anything. Good call. *If* he said anything now, he'd probably say the wrong thing, and Billy would probably pulverize him and he really just *didn't want* that.

No... one intense, super close gesture didn't mean they were *friends* much less mean anything MORE.

This didn't mean anything, and Billy couldn't have meant anything by

it. Could he? FUCK. No, he misread something. Billy hated him, thought he was useless, weak, *Paper Knight*.

'*You soft, pretty preppy shit.*' Billy's exact words. He obviously didn't take him seriously.

Besides, he looked and probably acted *nothing* like Antoine.

HOLY HELL.

Steve. *Stop*. Comparing. Yourself. To. Billy's *Ex-Boyfriend*.

God, maybe he did need Billy to beat the shit out of him again to get these thoughts out of it.

"Now fuck off, and get some sleep. *King Steve* needs to be on his A-game when The Kingpin makes his move." Billy finally found his voice, and it sounded normal enough. Steve didn't say anything, but his eyes shifted to the drivers' seat of the ambulance.

"I'm not gonna take off chasing it if it's lurking right out there, Dumbfuck." Billy sniped and that pulled Steve from his stupid trance. Steve shook his head as if to shake the stupid fucking feelings from it.

"Get inside the hospital then, jackass, it's why I'm out here, Mrs. Sinclair sent me to get you." Steve managed to sound a lot more aloof and composed than he actually was. He couldn't let Billy unnerve him anymore. He took what he hoped was a nonchalant step back.

Billy stepped back too, looking away, and for a second Steve almost would have said Billy looked... bummed.

"I'm keeping watch, shit for brains." Billy hissed, eyes poisonous. "GO, GET LOST!" Billy yelled out, a hair shrill and Steve rolled his eyes.

Steve turned on Billy with his middle finger high in the air.

Sorry Mrs. Sinclair, he gave it his best shot. He went right first to get his bat from his BMW then turned to go back into the hospital, avoiding looking anywhere Billy's direction.

Steve swore he heard a bang of something against metal, like a kick

against an ambulance as he went back into the hospital.

He spotted El fast asleep next to Hop, snoring loudly on a sofa.

He stared in utter disbelief that Hop allowed himself to fall *this* heavily.

"He's only asleep because I convinced him I would have first watch, and I'd make you sleep." Mrs. Sinclair read his mind. Erica had fallen back asleep, and Mrs. Sinclair was absently combing through her hair.

"You're too smart for Hop, that's for sure. Billy won't come in. Says he's keeping watch too." Steve didn't want to interrupt their family moment any more than he had. He had pegged Mrs. Sinclair as pretty no-nonsense but she definitely doted on her kids. A less frantic Joyce Byers.

"You should tuck that necklace away. Could get caught on something." Mrs. Sinclair tugged a hidden chain around her neck and Steve flushed and immediately stuffed the pendant down his shirt.

"Good call, thanks Mrs. Sinclair." Steve coughed. How much had she heard? He had to appear cool.

"Vivian, and you're welcome Steven."

"Steve's fine." Steve couldn't call her by her first name yet.

Dustin, thankfully, was still asleep when he went in their side room. His notebook was half tucked under him. He spotted some doodles and scribbled notes across it, mostly stick figures and bullet points.

He didn't have the knack for art like Will did, but Steve still thought the doodles were pretty cool. He could see one that that was probably Dart, and one that was definitely himself and Dustin. Dustin drooled in his sleep like basset hound. He couldn't believe that Billy called him *cabbage patch*...but maybe... nah. He'd never admit the resemblance. It would make him look bad by association.

Carefully Steve got on the bed and pulled out the crinkled, folded faxed photo. He still couldn't see Billy look like *this* in real life. He

then looked at Bayani, smiling kinda like El did. Bayani looked like a lunatic, but also looked like someone who could handle Billy's mood swings. Sang Hoon and Billy definitely fed off each other's energy.

'Slipped...Easy A.'

'I'm good at them. Languages.'

No. there was no way Billy spoke Korean *and* Chinese. That was *too* much.

Carefully and silently, Steve folded the photo and put it back. He'd figure it all out when he brought Billy back to Hawkins...and kick his ass.

The punch across his jaw, even though Billy called it a *slap* (yeah right), brought a grin to his face. It wasn't everyday he could catch Billy off-guard.

He took the syringe out of his pocket and put it on the table. Then, Steve closed his eyes and slept like the dead.

Notes:

Heyoooooooo I'm back!

Thank you all who have kept up with this story!

And yes, St Michael has a lot of symbolism for Steve!

The Archangel Michael is patron saint of warriors and protection, and chivalry (hahahahaha)! the Archangel Michael is also the leader of the army of Heaven against evil and the forces of Hell. In scripture the Archangel Michael also defeats Satan.

However, equally as important in Catholicism, the Archangel Michael is also the Angel of Death, and appears at death to allow a soul to redeem itself and ascend into Heaven, which is why he is depicted carrying scales. He weighs the souls to see if they should ascend into heaven, or descend into Hell.

The common St Michael's medallion also has that exact inscription on it. It is to be implied here that Billy's mother and at least grandmother were Catholic, which is prominent in France.

You may interpret Mei's prediction of Steve's transformation, from a fish into a dragon, as coming to fruition since the Archangel Michael leads the forces of Heaven into and against Hell. However, you have not seen the extent of Steve's transformation of course. He has only just put on the necklace.

Not much else in terms of symbolism in this chapter, there will be more in the next when things start to get WEIRD. (queue the negative consequences of Billy and Erica getting mind reaped) :(:(

And yes, poor, poor El. Don't worry, I do NOT intend for her to be useless. The Upside-down just happens to know what she is capable of and is sort of containing her for the moment, but she will not be completely sidelined. She is important, however she is not, and will not be a MAIN character of this fic. So, if you're an El 'fuck everything up totally' fan, this might not be the fic for you, but she will definitely kick some butt.

Also, this couldn't be a fic without Dustin. I hope I'm doing his character justice. I couldn't help but have his character show up and poor Steve, babysitter again.

Expect more tension between Erica and Dustin btw. In my opinion, they are perfect opposites of each other, but don't think they are going to hate each other.

Also, haven't exactly made up my mind about how Erica and El will interact, but it definitely will happen and it definitely will be fun.

Hop and Mrs. Sinclair are definitely also very important and don't expect either of them to fade out of the spotlight anytime soon. Mrs Sinclair is definitely my sage in this fic, she has been around the block too many times, but her temper and control issues still get the best of her at times.

Expect some serious Vivian/Billy bonding a la Joyce/Steve bonding next chapter.

I'm going to try to do a better balance of action and character development, but it's never been my strong suit.

OH, and speaking of that. the ANGST with our BOYS. I'm so silly. I couldn't help it. I didn't mean to rush it so quickly, but I just HAD to for the SYMBOLISM. And I think I managed to keep them both pretty in character for the most part, but then again this fic is far from canon soooooooo its hard to tell. Let me know if you thought it read well, or it was too rushed.

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed it. This was a bit Steve/Billy heavy, next chapter will incorporate more interactions across the other major characters!

-TL

6. A Surging Storm

The Paper Knight and The Killing Tree

Chapter Six: A Surging Storm

Billy groggily came to in a bed, and his right hand hit the side rail of the bed frame. Did score an easy lay from Tonya's and crash at her place? No, her bed frame only had rails on the top and bottom (which came in handy).

The sour, stank taste of vomit fuzzed in his mouth. He threw up? He NEVER did that.

What day was it? Did he have school? Neil was gonna kick his ASS if he overslept because he was hungover...he moved his leg and he still had his boots on. His left was all gunky. This made no sense, he always took his boots to not wake Neil up. Also *respect*...except Neil was monster chow now so...

Oh.

OH *fuck*.

That's right. *Bat Country*. The fight. Vivian Sinclair. The Ketamine.

Did Harrington...*overdose* him?

He was getting soft. This was all just TOO fucking TYPICAL. Again?!

FUCK SPECIAL K. What a *loser* drug. He didn't even know you could OD on it!

Billy scrunched his face up, remembering everything that led up to it. Chief Custard, he had to get away from THAT guy.

Billy didn't move a muscle, and did what he was good at, listen for anything in the room.

Dead silence. Should he chance it? Fuck it.

He chanced a peek. Harrington was passed the fuck out in some chair. He looked like shit warmed over, hair stuck up on one side all nappy and dark rings under his eyes. His neck was also at a cranked out angle in his chair. He was definitely gonna have a crick in it.

Karma. *Fuck him.*

He slowly sat up, head still woozy but he had to power through it. His trusty knife lay innocently on a nearby table. Billy fought a lingering bout of nausea, and debated picking it up. This screamed trap, like one of those psychological games.

Silent as the grave, he moved his arm and grabbed the knife in a reverse stance, waiting for an ambush.

Nothing.

Steve didn't so much as breathe. No one came to the door.

Billy caught his reflection in the steel. It was cleaned and *sharpened*. Billy didn't fucking question who sharpened it or where they found a damn whetstone in a hospital of all places. He DID question why it was THERE...didn't they mention cuffing him and leaving him high and dry?

Yeah. This was kinda the *opposite* of that.

Was leaving him uncuffed with the knife on the table some sort of gesture of *trust*? What WHACK JOBS.

He could gut Harrington wide open like Jerry's favorite fish dish and leave this room like the Shining bloodbath before anyone would be the wiser.

But he wasn't *that much* of a psycho.

His stomach gurgled. STARVING.

Time to light out and find some grub. Maybe some liquor too. Feeling Tequila. He needed something after falling into the K Hole, the fun term for overdose. He'd never shot up Ketamine, but his Maman and Ant had *plenty*.

If this backwater hospital was where he thought it was in this landfill they labeled a town, there was a supermarket nearby. Next to it was that liquor store he'd occasionally bribe the clerk for bottles of whatever was cheap and strong.

He looked over at Harrington. He was KO'd, but had some old rope in his lap. It was expertly tied in some sort of intricate knot.

Kinky. Didn't take '*Mister Shining Knight*' for the type.

Billy couldn't really remember much about what Steve told him before he drugged him, but he did remember calling him *dangerous* and *irresponsible*. Shit Neil'd say. So... chances of him finding out if he liked that kinda bondage shit in the bedroom were pretty SLIM.

Ugh fuck all this PSYCHOLOGICAL *horsepiss*.

He looked down at Harrington's shoes, one was untied. Who ties ropes into knots like this and leaves their own shoes untied? This is why he needed St. Michael...Oh. This would be fun. He would get his crew all the time with this joke whenever one would pass out with their shoes on.

He tied his shoelaces together.

Haha, catch me if you can, you pretty, preppy little shit.

He groggily made it to the window. Using all his upper body strength he gradually and quietly eased it open just enough for him to slither out.

Parkour time.

Oh, second story. A damn *cake walk*. He carefully maneuvered his body around and slowly did a negative pull up, easing his body down until he finally dropped. He landed in a perfect squat and fluidly somersaulted back. He looked up and dusted off his hands. He didn't hear anything.

Bayani would be SO proud.

Baya. That's RIGHT. Right before he fell into the K hole, he talked to

Baya.

His Kuya (older brother) was coming for him.

Some fuck-all time ago

Billy was heavily denting the ambulance door in with his boot when Vivian Sinclair approached him like she *knew* him.

She had her hands on her hips and the same look on her face like his Maman made when she found out he skipped school again.

"Yeah. WHAT? Primed for a lecture? For the record, I'm not apologizing for anything Neil Hargrove has done." Just what he needed, someone else pissed at him for something way outside his scope of control. His hands itched for a cigarette but he had to save his for the Kingpin.

"No lecture, and no child should apologize for their parent's actions. I don't buy the 'Sins of the father' Nonsense." Vivian Sinclair's voice sounded firm, but didn't angle for anything more. BUENO.

Billy snorted. He was NO saint either, but his sins were his OWN.

"Here, looks like you needed them more than Chief Hopper." Thank the lord Vivian Sinclair handed him three hand rolled smokes. He hadn't had hand-rolled since Sang Hoon's 19th birthday party. He'd be twenty now.

He tentatively reached for them, there had to be a *catch*. He snagged them quick, and she didn't say a thing, just leaned against the side of the ambulance.

'*Snick*'

He lit the cigarette and ever so carefully inhaled.

"You must have quick hands to lift those off Chief smokestack. And moxie, stealing from the *law*." Billy smirked wagging a finger.

Oh DIOS MIOS YES...he needed this after Steve just trampled the

stupid flicker of hope that MAYBE there was the slightest SHOT Steve might not be as straight as he acted. The heat of Steve's gaze could have *incinerated* him. There was no mistake, Billy Loga knew of the sparking electricity of being checked out. But he guessed he wanted it TOO much. Another Loga fuck up, he imagined *shit* where it DIDN'T exist.

"My sister taught me a few things. You remind me of her. Headstrong. Smart. Too smart. Angry." That caught him by surprise. She had to be talking about Marion.

"I ain't got a lot to be happy about, and *sad* never helped anyone. And I don't have the *luxury* to be soft and NICE." Billy exhaled smoke again slowly, making sure he didn't make a flamethrower out of his face.

"It's a *damn* shame." She said simply. Yeah fucking is.

Minutes ticked by in silence.

"You remind me of my Maman. No nonsense, good style, strong. Too strong." Billy admitted, looking at her. She was no typical housewife to come here, Susan couldn't handle balancing a damn checkbook.

"Maman? French?" Eh, he slipped up, but fuck it.

"She was French. We spoke it in-house. My Memere and Perere had her in Paris, and moved to LA after World War Two. They thought they'd have an easier go of it in America. They thought *wrong*." Billy inhaled deep, almost coughing on the strong tobacco. Shì de (yes)! This shit it the SPOT. In another universe he'd tell Sheriff Hop and Scotch he was a damn tobacco *artist*.

"That sort of move is NOT easy." She admitted and Billy nodded, staring off into the distance.

"Nope. My Memere's family hated my Pepere. He was a Berber from Mauritania, Africa. She was Parisian, and as white as my hair is curly. A real 'lady and the tramp' movie special. Add THAT up." Billy didn't really intend on telling Vivian Sinclair about any of this, but he rolled with it. He hadn't talked them in *ages*. Felt good.

"Your mother couldn't have had it easy in LA being half black and French. Or you." Vivian Sinclair was actually listening to him. Little Hicks hit definitely got this from her mom.

"I pass white *easy*. My Maman didn't as much. But, most morons just assumed she was *Mexicana*, or just sported a true California sunblessing. She did great until she slipped up and slept with some prick soldier and didn't use a rubber. She slipped up again when she made the same mistake her parents made, and didn't get a coat hanger when the piss test turned out *positive*." Billy scrunched his nose.

Pause

"You saying your mother wasn't a good mother?" Vivian Sinclair asked and he saw *red*.

"Fuck NO." Billy snarled. "Letty Loga should have won a damn medal of honor. When she *could* and was *healthy*, she could out-cook anyone in South Central with nothing but eggs and potatoes. She made sure I had something to open on my birthday, clothes that fit, a roof over my head, and a brain in my head. She also taught me to *dance*. She was gonna be a *real* dancer, not like what she ended up *settling* for." Billy spat, eyes blazing but Vivian Sinclair had that look on her face like he fell into some trap.

"I *doubt* your mother would want you to think of yourself as her biggest mistake. I don't gamble much, but if *I* remind you of *her*, then she must have been quite proud of you." Vivian Sinclair fucking smirked at him.

He took another long drag. Too tired to fight her on this.

"Maybe you're right. The last thing she said to me was when she got home she was gonna cook my favorite breakfast just for doing well in a basketball game." Billy waited for the inevitable question of 'what happened to her?'

"What was it? Your favorite breakfast?" Ok he wasn't expecting *that*.

"Omelette aux pommes de terre, with REAL cheddar, not that fake

processed plastic. Spam too. But some *jackoff* named Miguel Santiago sold my mother and some John BAD dope. Instant overdose for her and the John. Both dead as *four o'clock*. He killed himself in jail before he was locked up for good. *Lâche, Coward*." Billy couldn't tell anyone why he told Vivian Sinclair all of this. Maybe 'cause she was just listening.

"And then you were forced to stay with that... *rabid*, MADMAN Neil Hargrove?" Vivian Sinclair's took a smokey, dark edge like tinted glass. Billy shook his head negative.

"No. My birth certificate got 'lost in the system'." Billy heavily air quoted that because guardian angel detective Maya Freeman pulled some strings. "I stayed with my godmother, a *detective* believe it or not, Maya Freeman, for one and a half years before her lifeline went flat too. Gunned down with her partner by some Russian coke slingers in a revenge hit. He lived, but his legs *didn't*." Billy didn't believe in curses. He *wasn't* cursed. He just was *wrong* and wanted things he didn't *deserve*. He felt things he *shouldn't* feel towards people he dragged down with him.

"My Maman may have been proud of me, Maya may have loved me like her own, but Billy Loga *breaks* things. Always have, always will." Billy took one last long drag and exhaled slow and deep.

Maman.

Maya.

Antoine.

Steve just might be next on the list. Maybe Erica.

"You've had a *hard* life Billy, don't make it *harder* for yourself. If it means anything from a college drop-out nurse who moved to the middle of *nowhere* chasing a man...you're not blame. What happened isn't *your* fault. Pardon my French, but *shit happens*." Vivian Sinclair was being far too nice. It confused him because he didn't think she was this kind of person. *Nice to be nice*.

"Shit happens every DAMN Day. Just look *where* you, Erica, and I are

stuck and *who* we are stuck with. We're stuck in an ass backwards *bat country* with a junkie cop, and don't question me, I know junkies when I see'em, some creepy preteen, a cabbage patch geek, and his pissy majesty, *King Steve* himself. If we aren't neck deep in shit, then I don't want to know how much deeper we have to sink to get there." Billy snorted and he got a slight smile and a nod from Vivian Sinclair. Good she had a sense of humor. She'd *need* it.

"I'd say we're close. My sister went through hell in Oakland, and she spent some time in Haiti as a result and learned French. She taught me some. It was a nice thing you did, giving Steven your necklace to protect him." The FUCK she SAY?! Billy's back stiffened. The way his shirt was all knotted up, his hair, and her being ANY sort of SMART meant she had to know not only was he a *faggot*, but also had it BAD for Steve.

Steve might know he was *gay* as Fabergé too. If those signs were in this backwards Hawkins, and Steve stole his necklace from the *crime scene*, it meant that Steve saw the sign too. It was up to Steve to believe that sign Neil wrote, or the carefully crafted 'straight as an arrow' mask he wore in Hawkins.

But even if Steve believed he was gay, he DEFINITELY wouldn't know he wanted to fuck him *boneless*. He was sort of *oblivious* in that way straight guys *always* were when gays hit on them.

UNLESS Vivian Sinclair wanted to tip him off.

'*She told me it was a bad word like nigger, and it meant when a boy like liked only boys and that it was the way it just was.*' Erica said her mother didn't have a problem with gays.

Billy swallowed cautiously.

"He needs it. He's too *soft*, too *nice*, and doesn't have the taste for a REAL fight like I do. He somehow got himself cut up already for *fucks sake*." Billy didn't look down on Steve for those things, they just lived totally different lives. Like that terrible song by Journey: just a small town boy, city boy born and raised in South Central.

"He got himself cut up by going under the police truck, fixing it so it

could start. He *saved* us. He's more savvy than you give him credit for." That caused Billy to pause. So, Steve knew shit about cars. That was useful, and HOT.

But she was missing a *bigger* point. The Kingpin told him it *wanted* Steve DEAD. *Specifically* Steve.

The Kingpin's fight was with him, and him ALONE; just like he told him and Steve. Billy'd get his revenge. He'd take the fight to his doorstep SOLO if he had to.

He'd ring the Kingpin's fucking bell so hard he'll *deafen* this wasteland and Hawkins.

"Case in point. A knight needs his *shining armor*, right? That's Steve's shtick, hero saving the day, NOT mine." Billy abruptly opened the dented to hell door and pulled out the box he had stored there.

It was time for some defense.

"Shtick, hmmm? So if you think he is trying to be the hero, who are you?" Vivian asked eyeing the tanks filled with gasoline he siphoned from the ambulance along with rags he made from scrubs he found.

"I'm the *hellion*." Billy grinned thinly. "Back in South Central, my six family members and I ALL had our part to play. Mine was to scout shit out and start fires that needed starting. See, this Poltergeist is biding its time for some *plan* just like any other gangbanger planning a revenge hit in South Central. I'm not about sit pretty and wait." Billy locked eyes with Vivian Sinclair. He didn't know her well, but he had a feeling she would let him do his thing.

He had originally planned to just bolt out and find the Poltergeist, but he came to him and defense he could do.

He took the gas can and the extra scrubs he found and doused them all, and made a semi-circle around the hospital ER driveway. He looked back to see Vivian Sinclair actually helping him out. Someone in this hickshit town actually wasn't giving him the *third fucking degree*.

"...Merci, Madame Sinclair." He couldn't remember the last time he

thanked someone and *meant* it. She was being real *cool* about all of this. Man, would his Maman, Maya, and Mrs. Sinclair get along. They'd probably all sit around drinking cheap wine and playing canasta, listening to Earth, Wind and Fire.

"D'accord. Call me Vivian. Saves time." Her accent wasn't half bad.

"Très bien." Vivian it was.

Pause.

"Erica says that you can speak to the ghost. That it only speaks to you in *Korean*. I could tell she was telling the truth. I can usually tell when she lies, even when she covers for Marion." Vivian's tone held no judgment, almost like...curiosity.

"I'm good at languages, speak *five* of 'em: French, Spanish, Mandarin, Korean, and Tagalog. Don't ask why I *can*, it just STICKS in there." Billy pointed to his temple. "Comes in handy a lot though."

"What was the Poltergeist saying to you?" Oh... that's what she really wanted to know. He wasn't about to sugar coat this medicine.

"It thinks Erica and I *belong* to it. I think it sees us as some sort of... modern day human sacrifice. He's acting like he's the god in a Mayan or Vodou ritual. I guess The Killing Tree is its sick altar and Erica, and I are some sort of *tribute to it*. Camazotz, a Mayan bat god of sacrifice, my brother Javier told me about, would be right at fucking home here." Billy didn't really give too much of a shit what a ghost thought because it was dead wrong. Also, he wasn't Javier, who still lit Votive Candles and prayed to fake spirits.

"My baby belongs to NO ONE especially—" Vivian was cut off by a high pitched chirp and a dark shadow moving through the branches of the trees.

He hadn't counted on something *flying*. With it being this dark and murky they wouldn't know what hit them until it was too late.

Sitting fucking ducks for literal bat country. Xièxiè Hunter H. Thompson.

"I sure hope you know how to use that shotgun, cuz I'm about to flush out our prey. Hunting Season." He wasn't afraid of anything this pussy poltergeist was about to send his way. He'd CHOMP the head off these bats JUST like Ozzy Osborne in Black Sabbath.

They needed light, fire, and to disrupt whatever shitstorm was about to PISS down onto them.

With a flick of a lighter he lit the scrubs he spread out, but it still wasn't enough light. It did look pretty bitchin' though. A ring of fire.

"*This* shotgun isn't for show, and neither am I." Vivian replied. Good, she didn't need to be Annie Oakley, she just needed a damn SPINE. In record time he went back to Plan A. Fuck defense, time for some *offense*. He strode back across the street to the ambulance and sparked the black and red ignition wires to life to start the engine.

Those rats with wings were sure as hell gonna *hate* what he was about to do. Pop those cherries!

"OK, wait for my signal, then it's open season." He flipped on the siren and lights, and the whole road pulsed and glowed up white then red. He could see the bats with a wingspan as big as he was tall tucked all in the trees screeching and flapping like frightened virgins on prom night.

But *that's not all folks*.

The chirps and rustling got louder as he quickly double backed to the gas tank of the ambulance and with a snick of a lighter he lit the scrubs he has stuffed down the fuel line. He hadn't siphoned all the gas out of the ambulance, these big fuckers could hold a lot.

"Billy, you better NOT be doing what I'm *thinking* you're doing." Vivian warned, but he was far too AMPED to really care. This was gonna be SO brutally SATISFYING to bring the fight to the Kingpin this time.

The sweet wine of revenge danced on the tip of his tongue as he got back behind the wheel of the ambulance, put the fat girl in drive, and *floored* it.

"Special Delivery, served HOT for you scared little VIRGINS! Gaja (let's go)!" Billy knew he must look like a kid on Christmas morning when the ambulance picked up just enough speed for him to bail out the driver's side door and launch into the woods. He tucked into a roll just in time to cover his head as the ambulance hit the first tree, siren wailing. Fire erupted up the rear of the ambulance and Billy quickly scrambled back across the street.

In the movies, they would have *normal* cars explode all dramatic like a BOMB, but that's not what usually happened. Cars *rarely* explode if you torch them. He knew.

NOW. If that car had four oxygen tanks in the back, just like he with what he loaded into the ambulance...THAT will get you some *fireworks*.

Tois, deux, un.

A fiery explosion rocked the woods like a metal concert. The force flung Billy back across the rest of the street, knocking the wind out of him a bit. Billy grinned from ear to ear.

RISE AND SHINE!

His ears rang a bit as he heard blasts from the shotgun and shouts.

Oh yeah, that most *definitely* woke up Erica and the others.

A bat the size of a *buzzard* dropped DEAD next to him. He could see where Little Hickshit got her dead-shot talent from.

"BILLY! What did you actually *do*?!" Steve was in his face pulling him off the street by his jacket like he wanted to slap him again.

He didn't expect Steve to understand, but Billy was a bit taken aback that he looked so damn pissed off. *Fan-fucking-tastic*.

Steve looked at him the way *Neil* would.

"Doing what I do *best*, taking the fight to *them*. Do what you do best, plant your feet, and play some D." Billy frowned deep and pushed Steve off. He stalked out, knife in hand, able to see them well enough

to jump and intercept one of the bats diving at Erica. He slashed down where the wing hit its slimy neck and jerked it down, slicing the wing clear off. Blood and goop splattered everywhere as the bat flopped and cried on the asphalt. He stomped on its neck a few times to silence it. Malahay (gross).

"GET OFF ME!" bat the size of *hang-glider* swooped down at Vivian Sinclair. It knocked the shotgun from her hands and picked her up just like in those B-rated monster movies.

Hell No. He was NOT going to let Erica's mom get killed just like both of his other mothers because of *him*.

The chief fired his gun at the giant bat and it shrieked and flew lower. That other creepy girl was busy pulling others out of the air and flinging them to the ground.

"Mama!" Erica ran towards it with her hammer and flashlight. No, he was *not* going to allow her to show her power and get her stalked for LIFE like Bayani.

He spotted the shotgun, but he promised his Maman long ago he'd never use one. Plus the shot was too risky with how *herky jerky* Camaztoz was flying.

"ERICA! I GOT THIS!" Billy yelled, looked like he'd have to show his party trick sooner than he thought.

He got out his lighter, and one of Chief Queef's roll ups, and quickly lit it.

He hoped that he was *right* and that the fire would burn *only* the Camaztoz. The smoke didn't hurt his or Little Hickshit's lungs inside the hospital and where there's smoke...

There's FIRE.

He broke into a full sprint and shielded the lit cigarette from the wind. He inhaled and cigarette cherry flared up nice and orange.

"HEY YOU UGLY FUCK, TURN AND SMILE FOR THE CAMERA!" Billy inhaled, almost ashing the whole roll up and filled his lungs with

acrid smoke.

A crack of a revolver and the bat flew even lower. Vivian's legs now dangled just over the pavement near the cars; she was fighting hard.

He exhaled *harder*.

A blazing *inferno* erupted out of his mouth like Mount St Helens. El Camazotz screamed and dropped Vivian to the ground. She looked fine but he couldn't let 'chicken little' get away just to come back and get an easier target like Cabbage Patch.

Oh SATAN, he'd *never* hear the end of it from Steve if he let Cabbage get eaten. He tossed the completely ashed cigarette and drew his knife.

Billy saw to his left Steve's precious BMW. He leapt onto the hood, next roof, then vaulted onto the back still burning Camazotz. He grappled the back half of it, right behind the wings with his left arm.

"Rodeo time, Amigo!" Billy's facial expression was all feral glee as he raised his knife and started going to the town on it. as it tried to throw him off mid-air. Looking back, he knew he must look COMPLETELY fucking *psycho*.

So *what* if he WAS? Psycho got *results*. Psycho was what he KNEW. It was *fun*.

Camazotz's right wing finally faltered and he continued to strike. They hit the pavement with a smack, and flipped a few times. Billy winced as he struck the ground at an awkward angle, but still continued slashing and stabbing at anything he could. Wing. Neck. Head. Claw.

"Heyyyaaah!" He knew Erica's battle cry from anywhere and he saw in his periphery that she had started smacking Camazotz's back with her hammer. Good job, she waited just like he wanted her to.

"IS THAT ALL YOU GOT, KINGPIN?!" Billy shouted as the Chief entered his vision and *double-tapped* it in the back of its head with his revolver. OK he had to give Chief Ding Dong credit for that one, that's something Maya would have done.

Pause.

"Jane are you OK? Dustin?! Everyone?" He hollered and got a chorus of 'yeses'. Billy stood up and noticed he was actually pretty banged up, but didn't matter because he didn't hear any more shrieking or flapping so they *won*!

Ha! He did it! He beat the Kingpin before he could put out that revenge hit on Steve!

"Where did those creatures come from? The Upside Down has gargoyles now?!" Cabbage yelled out, next to Steve. Steve was holding his right shoulder, but looked ok. Billy looked back to Vivian Sinclair and while she looked shaken, she kicked a piece of Camatzoz aside. Maybe she was a bit scratched up, but it was nothing the hospital couldn't fix.

The hairs on Billy's neck stood on end. Everyone was staring at him, well everyone except Erica who had scurried back to her mom.

Oh *yeah*. The FIRE breathing.

"And Steve, Billy can breathe *fire*?! He's literally a DEMON. He *enjoyed* mutilating that Gargoyle, Steve! Hey, you! YOU'RE A PSYCHO!" Does Cabbage Patch ever shut up? He was pointing at him like he was the bad guy.

Billy just rolled his eyes and flipped him off.

Steve wouldn't side with Cabbage on this, he got RESULTS. They got the W, the win.

"He's not a Demon, you loud-mouth. He's He-Man and he saved my mom!" Erica shot back. Something unexpected softened in his chest, he hadn't expected Little Hickshit to defend him in front of everyone. Billy couldn't remember the last time someone vouched for him.

"It doesn't count if he's the *reason* she's in danger in the FIRST PLACE!" Cabbage patch waggled his sling shot. Billy balked and blanched.

That wasn't all the way true, he never asked for any of them to STAY.

"The Poltergeist is why we're in danger, you pendejo!" Erica cursed, and pronounced it right!

"Erica Diana Sinclair we talked about using that word. If anyone is to blame for any of this, it's *Neil Hargrove*. Now, we are going back inside the hospital to *rest*." Vivian still sounded shaky, but she picked up her own shotgun no problem.

Sins of the father. Yeah, this was on Neil. Billy willed himself to believe it.

The Chief approached him, gait strident like Neil's.

"Son, I fought in Vietnam." Oh great another Vietnam war lecture from Chief Second-Helping. "Napalm and bombs and going off on your own isn't the answer. We need to work together as a *team*. When you act on your own, You're a hazard. How did this even happen?" Chief Hooch gestured to all of him like he was a *walking problem*.

"Loga has a power too, like sister and I. But, fire destroys." Now that freaky one with her creepy bloody nose even glared mean at him. Before she just sort of eyed him all confused like she was studying a 3d eye puzzle.

The Chief, creepy Carrie, and Cabbage patch all angled and scowled at him like *he* was the one that attacked Vivian. El Lobo Feroz.

Lo que sea (whatever).

"Thanks for the history lesson and team bonding chat, *sheriff*. Oh, Impromptu PSA, fire safety lesson: stop, drop, and rock and roll." He flashed the rock and roll sign. "But like I told you before, I'm NOT waiting for the Kingpin to coordinate his bangers for a hit. Strike before you're *struck*. Eat or *get eaten*. That's how this *works*, it shouldn't be THAT hard even for you *bumpkins* to get." Billy hissed back. Why couldn't they see things his way? Or *listen*!

"That's NOT what you were doing, that if that was what you doing, you would have woken us up. *Instead*, you went ROGUE. You got some sort of *death wish* son, and I am not letting *you* bring US down with you. We're cuffing you and putting you in the back of the truck

till this blows over." He reached for his cuffs and Billy froze. An old, dormant fear crept in his head like a centipede.

"That ghost is *after* him, Chief Hopper." Billy wondered if Vivian called him 'Chief' because she was brought up to fear cops or respect them. "We can't put him in that truck if it can pick them up and eat them." Vivian Sinclair retorted and Billy's pupils shrunk to pinpricks and he took a step back. He was *surrounded*.

A flash of blue and red lights. Four cops surrounding Marcus, his knees on the asphalt, hands behind his head. A cop taking out his nightstick and battering him to the ground.

Sang Hoon grappling both Mei and himself down the alley, Marcus got caught. Nothing could be done.

"I TOLD you Vivian that if you were to come, I'd call the shots. We can cuff him to a hospital bed." Billy shifted to the balls of his feet. *Fight or Flight*. An intense wave of anxiety crashed over him. Gam-og-e gal su eobs-seubnida (he couldn't be locked up). Billy's pulse hammered in his ears and his heartrate jacked up high.

Jerry cursing at the hearing, trying everything to keep Marcus out of an orange jumpsuit.

"Everyone knows death is better than *prison*." Billy whispered, mostly to himself. He remembered Marcus being carted off to prison. He didn't come back the same, and he was only in ten months. Jerry got him out early and he still had that far-off look in his eye. The same sort of look Neil would get.

"Billy stop with the damn dramatics!" Steve sounded pissed, he had kept silent for the most part.

"I'll burn this whole wasteland down with you and the Kingpin in it before I let you arrest me. You'll NEVER CAGE ME." Billy's mouth dried out like sidewalk chalk when he screamed. 'la liberté avant tout. (Freedom above all else)', that was Marcus' motto. Goosebumps prickled over his skin, and he ground his teeth.

Fingers and a sting at his neck and he grabbed at it and jerked

instantly. Did he get stung...?

No...

In his hand was the mostly empty syringe he gave Steve... did he REALLY? Billy's eyes flashed wide and his jaw slacked and dropped. He twisted around to see Steve, face unreadable.

"You think I should be caged too... huh *King Steve*." Billy's face blanked out. He gave Steve that syringe to use against the Kingpin... he gave Steve his necklace to protect him and this...this is what he got in return? A cage?

Did Steve really think he deserved this?

Billy's vision swam and he slumped against the BMW. His eyes locked on Steve and his chest burned and he bit his lip... he didn't feel angry... he felt... just....

Betrayed.

Must be the Ketamine. He didn't do SAD.

"What you did was dangerous and *reckless*. Could have killed Mrs. Sinclair! You're so irresponsible, and you don't care about anything but your *revenge*! You don't get the consequences of your actions. You're going *out of control*. You're going to get yourself *killed*!" Steve's voice bounced around drunkenly in his head and he heard other voices slur together.

Dangerous.

Reckless.

Irresponsible.

Out of control.

Sounded about right, Neil had said similar things. *Hell*, even Mei even called him reckless. Steve really thought he deserved all of this. That it was his fault the whole hick circus was stuck in this acid trip Hell.

Blue and Red lights flashed all around him, and suddenly warm happiness and sadness tingled through his chest. He wanted to sob, laugh and fly away at the same time.

Maybe all of this was his fault. He deserved this hell, and he was fighting the King of it. He had gotten away with being his worthless self for so long, now it was time to PAY UP.

"You said that...to die in a fire! To die in a fire and leave all you alone...to die in a fire..." Billy mumbled, laughing to himself, little pink fires danced all around him next to dark butterflies.

Dark butterflies...an omen.

"—can't believe you *drugged* him!"

"He man—"

"—was gonna fight Hop!"

"EVERYONE calm do—"

Maybe he was JUST El Lobo Feroz. He'd eventually be put down.

He puked hard onto the asphalt. And again. And again. His body twitched, then his chest went liquid. He couldn't see anything anymore, the pink fires and dark butterflies were replaced with clouds. Nuages sombres et effrayants (dark scary clouds).

Harrington had the nail bat in his other hand and he wondered if he was just going to finish him *off*. Something dark and dense clogged inside his chest, *loneliness*.

"Just FINISH me off with that bat, Harrington. I *know* you want to, *shining knight*. That fat kid is right...." Billy pointed to his own head. "Here is where demons play. Wǒ zhǐ shì yīgè yāoguài...(I'm just a demon)." Billy muttered slurred and thick, he forgot that kid's name. Where was he anyway? Who was that cop? Whose car was this? What was he being arrested for again?

He managed to twist his body weakly so his back faced the door of the BMW before sliding down to the sticky pavement. His eyes rolled

back in his head a bit, spit or blood or something pooled at the corner of his mouth. He couldn't move his limbs, numbed cold.

He spasmed and hit slumped fully to the asphalt, waiting for the pain of the bat.

Billy heard a cacophony of rushed, muddled, raised voices, but a calm one sounded in his head clear as day.

He saw blue. A peaceful, happy blue. Deep Malibu sky blue. And it had a...braid. And a tranquil face. Tribal tattoos, dark eyes. Soft smile. Red lips.

"Loga, Loga, parating na ako (I am coming)." He knew that voice from anywhere. It was Bayani, and that was *his* aura. He always said his was the color of that girly liquor, blue curacao.

"Bayani....Nasa impyerno ako. (I'm in hell)." Billy murmured.

Present time

Billy wrinkled his nose and strode across the desolate parking lot towards what he hoped was the supermarket. That rank stench of mold and decay reminded him of the *one* alley behind the last place he and his maman lived in the day before trash day in *ripe* July. He could hear his maman's voice now, shouting and laughing out that half broken window across the alley to Simone about some dance gossip.

Steve, doe eyed, Harrington and his Cabbage Patch leech would probably avoid him from now on. Billy Loga had flew his Psicópata maníaco (manic psychopath), flag high. Cuffs and prison *never* got a good reaction out of him, but he went full MANIC. Yet one more classic loga FUCK UP. Another bridge burnt to the ground along with Maxine.

Fuck it, like he cared if Harrington ever gave him the time of day again.

He looked back across the street and *damn* if that ambulance wasn't still smoldering a bit.

If he had done something on that scale back in South Central solo, Javier would have *definitely* knocked some sense to him, or made him work at his mom's restaurant. Javier could be such a *prude*.

Oh fucking well, no dwelling on the past. And burning bridges was another thing he did best. If he made it out of this hellhole, he'd put so much distance between that town and his rear-view mirror he'd need new tires.

Sorry Little Hickshit, drag someone your age to that movie. Toughen them UP, and it'd also just look fuckin' creepy if he took her to a movie. Not that he cared what Tommy or Carol thought of him, but he didn't want PITY.

Luc William Loga wasn't anyone's pity case. *'I'm only out here because of Mrs. Sinclair.'* Fuck offffffff, Harrington. Next time someone told Steve to do something he didn't want to do, like talk to Billy Loga, he could say *that*.

He didn't want to know if that faggot stuff got out. He'd have to *somehow* put together some money because he doubted he could get back to Susan's house and get his stash under the floorboards of Neil's bedroom.

His gut still clamped up about everything, must be the hunger.

He didn't sense the Kingpin, must have fallen back. Collecting the troops for another go. It wasn't before long of trudging through the forest, which made a *nasty* mess of his thin scrubs, that he got to the shadiest, yeoggyeoun (disgusting) supermarket he'd ever had the displeasure of seeing.

Toppled and rusted carts were strewn everywhere in the parking lot with cars that looked like they'd never start again.

Next to it was a blacked out liquor store that looked straight out of a Halloween movie.

Michael Myers here was your cue...

"Now, let's put together a list. Smokes, booze, SPAM! Lots of Spam. Canned shit. Twinkies, peanut M&Ms for little hickshit and some real

food. I can probably cook *something*." Billy whispered to himself and his delts relaxed low down his spine. Shockingly, he knew his way around a kitchen. He kinda had to parent *himself* some. One, his Maman taught him a few things, two, she wasn't around a whole lot, three Maya was a homicide detective. Maya couldn't cook eggs without destroying four pans and making a lot of smoke. She and Antoine would compete for *worst* cook in history.

No. That was SUSAN. Steaks like hockey pucks.

Come to think of it, Max didn't know he could cook either.

Well, *no one* in Hawkins thought he KNEW what he was fucking doing. Chief fast food may have been a soldier, but on streets there were no *rules* or *order*. Sometimes you were on your own, and had to figure out through trial and error.

Billy *preferred* it that way. Gèng qīngsōng (Easier).

He picked up the least sticky shopping basket and started for the canned food aisle. He wanted corn...tomatoes... beans. Lots of beans. Kidney, black, pork and beans. *Good*. Next...peaches. Pears. Sweet shit like that. OK. Spam.

He found the Spam and dumped in like six tins of them. He used to make fried Spam sammies for him and Antoine everytime after they *did* it.

Post-Sex-Spam-Sammie time was *sacred*. Like Kwanzaa, Bastille day, or Chūnjié (Chinese new year).

Billy knew all the produce and shit would be rotten to hell, even though he couldn't see it yet he could tell by the putrid, porta-potty stench.

HARD PASS.

Didn't Little Hickshit say she liked breakfast food? Something about syrup? Waffles or pancakes?

He double backed and got a second basket and put in a toothbrush, toothpaste, some canned mushrooms, and some packets of taco

seasoning in there. Maybe he could make some poor man's chili or something. Put Spam in it.

He made it round to the frozen food and was surprised the glass was intact and still foggy. Did this backwards place keep the freezers ON somehow? Maybe it was this place *really* liked being cold.

He opened up one of the doors and put in a box or two of frozen waffles.

They *might* be OK. Shrug.

He swung back, got some syrup, the Twinkies and M&Ms. Unfortunately, almost of the packs of smokes were too rotted out, but he managed to find a relatively fine pack of Parliaments.

His *least* favorite brand. Jerry loved smoking this cheap shit if he couldn't find his 'double happiness' Chinese brand.

His brain sparked to life when he got to the registers.

"Paper or plastic? Plastic it is! Smart choice, you can reuse them as trash bags. Oh. Mr. Loga you forgot your change! Thank you for shopping at Food Lion!" Billy babbled to himself and practically sashayed with glee to the cash register. With a quick, practiced jimmy of his knife, he cracked the cheap Hawkins cash register WIDE open.

CHA CHING.

The bills were filthy but he could wash...

Oh God. *Launder* them. Sang Hoon would love that pun. He took every bill from cash register one, then cash register two, and finally cash register three.

Six hundred sixty five dollars. One dollar short of *his* number.

He took out the tooth brush, put some paste on it, and started brushing his teeth as he left the supermarket with a spring in his step, three bags of groceries, and a wad of cash in left boot.

Now, to the liquor store. Oras ng kasiyahan (party time)! He kicked open the door and this giddiness was what that kid Willy Wonka must have felt. Only with liquor and not candy, and the store was festering, rank and gross. But still...FREE booze and RIPE for the taking. He continued to brush his teeth as he worked the store, looking for his favorite....

Trouvé le (found it)!

He grabbed the largest bottle of Don Pilar Anejo he could find. His *favorite*.

He wondered what liquor Steve drank...scotch? Single malt? Something *haughty*, but strong. Good neat. Matched his eyes. He debated nabbing the bottle of Johnny blue... nah. Steve wouldn't probably drink in front of Cabbage Patch.

And since did he go shopping for *King Steve* anyway? Didn't he just drug him?

He MUST have it BAD.

Billy physically wiped the thoughts from his head by spitting out the toothpaste and ditching the toothbrush. He cracked the register collecting two hundred and eleven more dollars.

Nice little nest egg to start over with...maybe East Coast. New York. Philadelphia.

No.

Sunny *Miami*.

Great cocaine and BETTER Latino guys. Que guapo (good lookin). Billy grinned at the absurdity of the notion he would ever make it there, but pipe dreams were *sometimes* fun.

He left the store and sat on the hood of an old Buick. With a rip, he opened the lid on the spam and a pop, cracked open the cork on the Don Pilar.

"Cheers to Miami, Gānbēi!" He took a deep swig of the Tequila, it

went down *reaaaalll* nice despite the toothpaste aftertaste. He put the glass bottle on the filthy trunk with a clunk and dug into the tin of spam with a fork he found. Spam always tasted better fried, but he was so hungry he didn't care. He went through one and a half tins before getting out his lighter for a smoke.

'Snick'

If there was only way he could heat up the Spam without completely charring it. He realized he had been holding the lit lighter a bit too long and the flame had warped down his hand.

Oh, yeah, he could work with THIS.

He squinted at his hand and flicked closed the lighter. The flame danced around the back of his hand, curled down his fingers and snaked down his wrist.

Jí hảo. Excellent.

Oh yeah, they mentioned something about him being the devil when they tranq'd him didn't they? Demon? Maybe he really was El Diablo. His life had become some horror movie and he was the starring villain.

He heard an engine. Car. Was the redneck circus packing up and moving on? Probably a good call. He'd let *them* do *them*. He could always catch Harrington and get his necklace back later. He let flame around his hand and wrist smoked out, he was fine with being left behind. *Really*.

He took another deep, sharp swig of tequila and puffed on a cheap Parliament as Harrington's BMW rolled by and spun into the parking lot. *So*, they had the same idea he did. Estupitos, driving the *block and a half* here! Noise attracts those Cujo.

Billy, with marked disinterest, took out a packet of Twinkies. He'd have them after his cigarette.

The BMW scraped to a sudden stop and Harrington sprung out of the driver's seat like a five-oh responding to an active crime scene.

They *had* to STOP meeting like this.

"Billy! *Christ*, what in the hell are you DOING?" Harrington gasped out like he had just finished wind sprints at practice. Billy cocked his head to the side. He couldn't *read* Harrington here.

"Got hungry. Went grocery shopping. Being a *menace* to society works up one hell of an appetite, Harrington." Billy sneered and exhaled a perfect smoke ring. He never even made eye contact with him.

"I thought, we thought, you went after it *alone*." Harrington added unsteadily. He was running his hand through his hair as if to calm himself down.

Is that *so*?

"Sorry to *disappoint* you all, but I DON'T have a death wish. Do people who plan on killing themselves put defensive fire rings around their house? NO. Just take the *damn* groceries, FUCK OFF, and leave me BE." Billy gritted out venomously, eyes hard. He vividly remembered the shady look of *disgust* on Harrington's face when he looked him dead in the eyes after he blew up the ambulance.

"Holy FUCK, we *don't* want you dead! Get that through your *thick* skull!" Harrington approached him, confident, and Billy drew a long, skeptical drag off his cigarette.

"For NOW. I'm *useful*." Billy smirked and exhaled and a small plume of flame. He was getting better control of it. Why was Harrington still here anyway? He wasn't endangering anyone. He was just chilling, huwag makialam (minding his own business).

Harrington's face quickened serious like cement, and maneuvered full frontal in his space. He stood a lot taller than him because he was still sitting on the low hood of the Buick.

"No Billy...that's *not* why. Mrs. Sinclair said you *overdosed*...I almost killed you." Huh? How would she... oh nurse. Riiight. And yeah, he *certainly* fell down the K-Hole.

"Erica *freaked* out. She kicked me in the shin. *Hard*." Hell yeah, Little Hickshit!

"So, you drove here to *gloat* that you got one over on me, Harrington? Congratulations, here's your medal. I hope your shin bruises." Billy flicked the metal lid of the Spam at him. Harrington batted it away, jaw dropped in horror. Harrington then grabbed the bottle of Don Pilar and the bottle made a squeak when he popped the cork and took a swig.

King Steve drinks tequila.

"NO. That's NOT why I'm HERE. You're the one *not* listening. I didn't mean to...something happened during the bat fight....and nevermind. I didn't know that stuff was *that* strong. I came to the Upside-Down to get YOU out, to make sure *you* LIVED, goddamnit." Harrington locked eyes with Billy and Billy swallowed. Billy read Steve's face carefully, he didn't read a lie. In fact he had that stupid, *flustered* look on his face he got when he had to say something he didn't want to say.

"You wanted to save *me*? Don't lie, you came for Erica because she's Sinclair's sister. Don't bullshit a bullshitter." Billy challenged in a skeptical, low murmur. He threw the spent cigarette to the ground.

Though, Harrington did say he promised Maxine he'd bring him back. Why he had *zero* idea. She didn't *want* to see him alive, she wanted to see him with a toe-tag.

Harrington faced the bottle for another swig. He could handle his tequila.

"I can take Nance calling me bullshit, but *not* you. I came for *you*, you asshole, no bullshit." Steve seethed like he wanted to grab and shake him to emphasize the point, but he didn't. He wondered what it would feel like to have Steve's hands all over him that weren't fists.

Billy let his shoulders relax, his guard fully down.

"Yeah, King Steve, why's that? Got a hero complex?" Billy barbed back, deflecting because his throat thickened and got hot. Billy rarely got flustered, but now he itched for something to do with his hands. He shouldn't have tossed his cigarette.

Steve didn't take the bait.

"You don't deserve to be stuck in the Upside-down, you didn't deserve all that back at the tree either." Steve added unnecessarily. Billy didn't know why he brought up who deserved *what*. King Steve didn't know him well enough to know what he *did* and *didn't* deserve and more importantly, Billy didn't do *feelings* sessions.

"Pues, si...(Well, if...)" Billy trailed off. He wasn't sure where he was going with that sentence. Fuck, he also said that in *Spanish*.

"I should have listened to you at the quarry, *amigo*." Steve pressed, locking his big-ol' eyes with him and Billy rolled his his in return.

Oh for *fucks sake*, Sensitive-feelings Steve obviously took his quarry meltdown a little *too* personally. Billy wouldn't have listened to himself at the damn quarry.

"Can confession o'clock already, I was *manic* at the quarry." Billy said exasperated, before he really thought about it. It was true.

"Only because Neil almost killed you with a lamp! What a *bastard*." Oh. Byers must have squealed. He'd sock him again for that. "and for the record, even though I got a mean swing, I DON'T want to bash your skull in with my bat." Billy made a face at that.

"Oi! That's a bit GRAPHIC!" Billy's eyes flashed angrily in a challenge. If Steve said it in that level of detail it means he *definitely* thought about doing it.

"YOU suggested it, you *prick*." Steve scowled cute. Billy didn't remember saying that though. "You said I wanted to do it. And you called Dustin 'fat kid' and said he was right about you being a Demon. I guess you must have really been high to say Dustin was *right* about something." Steve chuckled dryly, taking another swig.

"Ohhhh, you expect me to remember something I did AFTER you drugged me. You must get *a lot* of second dates." Billy grinned in glee as Steve spewed his tequila across the ground.

"Relax, *du calme*, King Steve." Billy took back the bottle and took a swig himself. "Honestly.... One of my older brothers would have probably done something similar if I did that back in LA. Just think

of it as payback for me beating your face into blueberry pie." Billy clicked his tongue and let Steve off the hook. Steve wiped his mouth but his lips still glistened.

"Yeah, jackass, and you...doing our *own thing*, thinking no one has your back is fucking EXHAUSTING. So fucking cut it OUT." Steve's brown eyes roved over Billy's face, throat, and chest. Maybe it was the tequila... and that he just ate, but he felt much BETTER.

Billy smiled bright and opened the packet of his 'birthday cake'. His chest warmed up and he leaned back on the hood a bit. He braced his arm a bit to look up at Steve whose eyes scorched into his bare chest.

"No promises. But I do promise I won't blow up another ambulance... I couldn't get the second to start... heard you're good with cars though. Wanna help me *pop* her hood, and get it going *together*?" Billy smirked and wagged an eyebrow suggestively, just to fuck with him.

Steve Harrington fucking *blushed*.

Billy's groin got hot.

"Not sure if you got the right set of tools." Steve retorted, choked. Billy remained completely unaffected. Steve had seen in the gym showers what he had to *work* with.

He chuckled a bit and dangled one of the Twinkies in front of Steve. Peace Offering. Like his knife.

"If I don't, I'm sure you can rope something together. Saw that knot in the room. *Interesting*." Billy tongue his lip out obscenely and took a final swig, corking the bottle.

This time Steve took the Twinkie, and shoved his left shoulder...was Steve FLIRTING back?

"I used to sail, oh and thanks for tying my damn shoes together. What are you, *nine*?! I nearly fell on my face!" Steve took a bite out of the Twinkie. Billy laughed loud, genuine, and deep. He had forgotten all about that.

"Sad to see Sailor Steve can't take a joke." Billy taunted, eating the

last of his Twinkie, licking his fingers.

"That's a prank, not a joke. The only joke I see is the one right in front of me." Steve smiled down at him! He'd vault that image.

"I'm the real deal, Sailor Boy." Billy jutted his chin up, and bit like a shark. All Steve had to do was bend over a little, and he could lick the cream off the corner of his lips.

Talk about *pipe dreams*.

"A real pain in the ass." Steve jingled his keys. "Let's go, I told them I'd be back with you soon." Steve sounded pretty confident he'd be able to find him. Well... he supposed he *did*. Billy got the bags and slid off the hood to the ground right in front of Steve and stood up.

Despite the dark circles under Steve's eyes, he looked good enough to eat. *Suck. Fuck.*

"Lead the way to your rich kid yacht, *skipper*." Billy gestured to the BMW and Steve rolled his eyes and flipped him off.

He was rubbing off on Steve. Hehe.

He opened the passenger door and slid onto the dusty, but plush leather seat. This would be the first time he rode in a car with Steve. And it was *his* BMW. It annoyed Billy that this mattered *way* more to him than it did to Steve.

"What food did you get, anyway?" Steve asked as he cranked the ignition.

"Stuff for poor-man's chili. Special stuff for Little Hickshit. Nothing for you." Billy sassed as Steve snorted and looped around the parking lot and Steve mocked him.

"Little Hickshit? You mean *Erica*? What kind of nickname is *THAT*?" Steve pulled onto the main road and Billy's senses went on high alert for those roots.

"She has one for me, 'Big Cityshit'. Fair game. Oh, and if Cabbage Patch it tries to get his chubby, grubby hands on her stuff, no chili for

him." Billy scanned the road. Nothing.

"His name is *Dustin*. And you're... actually gonna *cook* chili? In the hospital? In the *Upside-Down*?" Skepticism rang high and Billy white knuckled the 'oh shit' handle above the door.

Clear road.

"For everyone but you." Billy flashed a fake grin, then his thoughts derailed. "How long was I out?" Billy was méfiant, cagey. He didn't like this false sense of security. He drummed his fingers on the dash.

"Dunno, maybe five hours. Why?" Tā mā de (Fuck). Too long for the King to be off his throne.

He scanned the treeline, he was not about to let the Poltergeist get one over on him. Billy bounced his knee and tongued his bottom lip out as they pulled peacefully into the ER loop of the hospital.

"Billy?" Everyone was out like a parade. An anxious, spidery dread skittered in his chest. A shadow flickered at the edge of the forest. Maybe. Mei's paranoia started to kick in as a dark feeling crept and twisted in his gut.

"Billy, what's up?" Steve grabbed Billy's shoulder and it grounded him a bit. Billy's wild eyes met Steve's placid ones. He could give Steve one thing, he always looked calm, solid.

Steve steadied him.

"*Nada*, amigo." Billy lied and quickly scrambled out of the car with the food.

"See, I *told you* Loud Mouth. You owe me two movie tickets." Erica sassed like the tart she was and rubbed some bet into Cabbage's dumb face.

"Ugh, you're so *annoying*. I don't even know who would want to see a movie with you!" Cabbage taunted back and before Billy stepped in Erica already had her index finger up.

"Uh, who do *you* know again? Oh that's right, no one *cool*." Erica with

the rebound three pointer to win the game. Billy chuckled despite his unease and stuck out his hand for his and Erica's secret handshake.

Elbow slide, grab hands, point.

"Steve! They have a handshake! We need one! I'll get on it. It will be way cooler than theirs." Cabbage head whined like a drug dealer getting paid in stolen goods.

Steve finally came around from the other side of the BMW flashing the 'OK' symbol.

His protégé: score 1, Steve's protégé: score negative one million.

"Did you go grocery shopping, Billy?" Vivian asked and peered in the bag with canned stuff in it.

"Uh, yeah. Got hungry, and um... thought chili would be easy." Billy said awkwardly as she pulled out the corn and a can of beans.

"Smart thinking." Vivian gave Sheriff Snowball *the eye*, and he didn't say anything. An icy dread locked down Billy's joints. He felt a hot gaze drill into his temple, had to be Steve.

He did his best to ignore it.

"Yes! Mama look, he got my favorite M&Ms!" Erica pulled out the waffles too. Billy *knew* the waffles were paydirt.

"Eggos! Syrup and Eggos. You're a good friend." Great, the creepy retard girl liked him. She and Erica and both flocked back inside the hospital, chatting about dumb girl shit. He heard something from far away, and whipped his head back to study the woods where the bats had flown out of hours ago.

Something nagged at him like one of those sluts from school.

"How did you know Jane liked Eggos?" Was that junkie chief talking to him like they hadn't almost tried to *kill* each other five hours ago?

"She's a kid. They're waffles. Not rocket science, Sheriff Slurpee." Billy bit out condescendingly and heard a whisper too faint to understand,

but it didn't sound like English.

The Kingpin dared try to interrupt his victory feast? Well, there was room on the menu.

"Hey wait! GODDAMNIT." Chief Zinger yelled as Billy shoved the rest of the groceries at him and made his way around the BMW to the street.

He examined the tree line. Nothing looked out of place.

"Billy, seriously, what's wrong?" Steve followed him, irritated.

"It's *here*. Get LOST, Steve." Billy motioned for Steve to stay back, which of course he fucking *ignored*. Il n'a jamais écouté (He never listened).

"No, I got your back." Steve sounded calm, and serious.

'snick' like a lighter it *clicked*.

The torched ambulance was GONE.

Billy pivoted to the right just in time.

"Putain (fuck)! Heads!" Billy yelled as he planted his feet, and threw his whole body into Steve's. The force of the tackle sent them both hurtling sideways to the ditch, *hard*.

Not inches over him, talking the diameter of a *basketball rim*, the front fender of the ambulance rocketed over them. With a deafening, quaking crash, it hit the pavement just beyond them.

He landed on Steve, face on his chest. Billy's adrenaline and rage crested high in his bloodstream.

Steve was almost *street pizza*.

"Jesus...You...You ok?!" "Steve, Ca va?" They asked each other at the same time. Steve's stupidly big brown eyes were even more wide open than usual. Fear.

"Fucking mint. Gonna topple this king." Billy heard gunshots and Cabbage Patch screaming something as propped himself up. He squeezed Steve's shoulder in what he hoped would be a signal of 'Got this'.

Billy reached for his right hand to help him up, but Steve weirdly grabbed it with his left.

"How we gonna do this?" Steve asked as they stared down the black, spidery Poltergeist which held back-half the torched ambulance up in the sky.

"I'm gonna *huff*, and *puff* and burn his shitty world DOWN. Soy El Lobo Feroz. Big bad wolf." Billy's face lit up like Christmas morning. Steve nodded all badass, and solid. King Steve had entered the arena! Deer in the headlights, washed up, 'hung up over Wheeler' Steve had bit the dust.

He tapped out a cigarette and put it to his lips right as two El Caimans slunk out of the nasty forest.

"You got more issues than Playboy, *but* I'm ready for some batting practice." Steve reached down and grabbed his bat which Billy guess he dropped when he tackled him.

"Good, Cuz daddy's not in the mood to round the bases with these cunt faced swamp bitches." Billy winked at Steve for more bravado and flicked open his lighter for effect.

He was going to break open the Kingpin's jaw, and *shit* down its ghostly throat for trying to flatten him and his King.

'Me cago en fantasma' he'll fuck that ghost.

"Boys, you two ok?" Vivian strode towards with her shotgun out like she was the one who fought in 'Nam. Now that he thought about it, she reminded him of a strange blend of his Maman AND Maya.

"We're good." Steve replied. Right behind her was Chief Cheesecake.

"If you can hurt the ghost with your fire, we can take on these two here." Whoa. Was Sheriff Sandwich actually giving him the latitude

to do what he *wanted*? The creepy girl stood behind him, giving him the thumbs up.

"Deal, Johnny Law." Billy still vowed to never call him by his real name.

"We can work together. Like a team, pendejo." Did the retard girl just call him asshole? She smiled at him.

He liked it better when she hated him.

"Steve! I got more syringes, and a staff." Cabbage Patch was hauling ass with a broken IV stand, the slingshot, and a fuck-ton of syringes.

They should be able to take on those two El Caiman while he dealt with the Poltergeist.

"Billy! I got my stuff we can do this!" Erica had her flashlight. He couldn't tell her to put it back; she seemed real intent on using it. When they made it out of here, he would make all of them *vow* to never breathe a word about her power, even if they blabbed *his*.

Then he heard a familiar, bone-shattering shriek. He couldn't place it, but he had heard it before. Maybe a...

"Billy! You know that sound, right? It's *Alien*!" Erica yelled back to him. Something large and dark parkoured in the forest behind the El Caimans.

'*Keep your tacky jewelry...do you think any of them are like Alien?*' The Kingpin was using monsters that Erica and he knew *against them*. Erica's Cujo, his El Caiman, his Camazotz, and now...

"Alien?! Like that space horror movie? You watch *those*?!" Cabbage yelled out, and Billy amped himself up for a real challenge until Steve stepped up.

"I got the Alien. You get the Kingpin. I can handle it, *trust me*, you'll see." Steve fronted different. This Steve was as hard as Nikki Sixx, the Steve he had seen in school was soft like Phil Collins. Steve made show of practice swinging his bat

Billy fully believed he could take out Alien.

Billy squared up to him and Steve's stare stayed steady. Sure, Steve wasn't cotton candy soft as used to be, but just because he fronted *hard* didn't mean he could *fight* hard.

"Take Erica with you. Move like water when you fight things bigger than you. When you get knocked down, get back up, King Steve." Billy stated serious as a car bomb. Baya said that once when he won a fight with a guy who was eight inches taller than he was. He swore Bayani stole that line from some cheesy kung-fu movie, but damn if it didn't clock.

"What, no breaking a plate over its head?" Steve sassed back all casual.

"Now who's all jokes." Billy clapped Steve's back one last time. "Zou ba. Let's go." He was DONE *waiting*.

Waiting got people *killed*.

Maybe if he hadn't waited for his maman to come home that morning, and went out looking for her he would have found her in time. Maybe if he and other six in his crew busted more of a hump to track down those Russians instead of wasting time in school, Maya would be *here*, and Jerry could *walk*.

Dios Mios, he was NOT going through some psycho therapeutic blame game right now. *Ice that*.

"All this just for a piece of me? TAKE A HINT! I'M NOT INTERESTED YOU YEAST INFECTED GUTTER SKANK!" He strode out across the street towards she poltergeist who was still holding that stupid ambulance.

"Dangsin-eun naui geos-ieyo (you belong to me)!" The Kingpin garbled out in Korean like a guy taking a cock, but not fully prepped yet.

"Fuck you, nobody owns me." Billy found his rage again. No one would ever make him do something he didn't want to do.

The unmistakable tang of gasoline filled the air. Good, he ended up walking out right where he and Vivian poured it.

"Dangsingwa dangsin-ui chingudeul-eun silpaehabnida. (You and your friends will fail)." He flicked open his lighter and let the flame snake down his wrist, up his elbow and ebb down his right leg.

"Age before beauty." Billy's face glowed like a furnace as fire raced down his pants leg and with a burst the fire raced in a line in both directions, separating the Kingpin and him from the rest of the crew.

He heard shouts and saw a brilliant flash of light from behind the wall of fire he created.

"Ama nega joh-ahaneun jal saeng-gin sonyeon-eul delyeo galgeoya. (Maybe I'll take the take the pretty boy you like)." Billy's blood boiled to a fever pitch.

The fire wall didn't burn too high, but he didn't need it to. It was for show. A fucking WARNING shot.

He tapped out another cigarette with his still burning hand.

"You're all talk, no walk." He was about to storm his fucking castle and bring it down like Babylon. He was sure gonna fuck his day UP.

"Neo yaghae. Naneun bulgasali ya. Neoneun na jasin-eul mulli chil su eobsda. Gung-geug-ui Mul Gwishin. (You're weak, you can't even come close to defeating me on your own. I am the Bulgasari, the ultimate water demon)." The FUCK it said?! Oh Sang Hoon would go on a *bender* if he found out all those tales his auntie told were actually TRUE.

Sang Hoon's auntie told them ghost stories on the way home from the grade school playground. One was the Bulgasari, a Korean monster with the nose of an elephant. The name meant the 'unkillable' a demon that controlled nightmares and ate iron. The Mul Gwishin, was a water spirit that lived in damp, cold places that tried to drown people, and take their souls.

She told them all those stories before those Crips burned her store to the ground with her and Sang Hoon in it. Hoonie was only nine, but

he made it out. Even had the *scars* to prove it. She wasn't so damn *lucky*. Sang Hoon never let them talk about his Auntie or her stories after that.

The Kingpin was basically saying he was both of them *combined*, but he didn't give a flying fuck because those were just stupid little stories that were *already* written.

He made his own damn life, and it wasn't 'Fin' yet.

Billy's laughter started out as a chuckle and raged as an inferno into a maniacal cackle.

"You know *what*, Bulgasari? I think *you're* the one scared of *me*. I'm the KING here." Billy hollered back. Billy KNEW it was true. Something about him, Erica, and especially Steve scared this thing, otherwise he'd be long *dead* by now. Kingpin was either scared of them, or really that damn *delusional* to think he could steal his and Erica's souls. He had brass balls to think he could possess them both into doing his dirty work by turning Hawkins into some hillbilly genocide.

He then spotted something in the bent open ambulance. Silver... no WAY. One of the oxygen tanks hadn't burst yet!

He scanned the ground for something, anything he could kick... metal bolt. That would do.

He'd make a fucking METEOR out of it.

"Naneun amugeosdo dulyeowohaji (I fear nothing)." The Kingpin chanted and Billy smelled a stable of horseshit.

Steve and the others had his back by keeping those other goons off him, the least he could do was kick a damn bolt. Despite the knee high wall of fire, he saw the Alien, a hybrid frog version, strike Steve down with his tail. He better get back up! Vivian racked her shotgun right as the remaining Caiman snapped his prickly snatch her way. Erica's flashlight shone dangerously dim. Chief and Cabbage's chests heaved, firing their slingshot and revolver.

Time to light the wick on his birthday candles.

"Special Delivery! Coming in hot from Yours Truly. Que te den (up yours)." Billy took a few steps back and with the flames still lapping up his leg he arched it back and launched it like a fucking fourth of July bottle rocket. The fiery bolt soared through the air and....

Direct fucking *hit! Manalo (victory)!*

The oxygen tank blew like that one time Maya left the gas on the stove and his cigarette set off the *whole* damn kitchen. The explosion knocked him back and he hit his head hard, but it was worth it to hear the Bulgasari make the same prissy squeal those Russian Coke dealers made when they stapled those signs to their chests.

As if on queue the Alien and the cunt faced El Caimanhe'd make bitchin' leather boots with once Vivian Sinclair was done with it, paused in their attack.

"HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT AMIGO?! SOY EL REY! I'M THE KING!" Billy got out one of the hand rolled jobs from his back pocket. Flame spiraled around his finger and he lit it. He inhaled and exhaled like the last max rep of a bench press.

The concentrated beam of fire actually turned blue like the blow torch Javier used to crack in half a parking boot. He gifted that trick parking boot to his mother so she'd could slip it on her El Camino. Meter maids didn't ticket a car that already had a boot on it.

The Bulgasari howled like Marcus' Doberman, Ripley.

THEY WERE WINNING.

Just then a writhing, festering darkness coiled in Billy's head, as a slashing, clawing pain. In an instant Billy crumpled to ground. Billy cursed but couldn't even hear himself.

"Aneun nawa hamkke dangsin-eul delyeo gal geos-ida! (I'll take you with me)." That voice came from his *mind*.

Billy's vision tunneled and blacked out into an abyss of cramping, blood-thinning pain. Countless needles stung his body all over. Billy bucked on the gravelly ground and grit his teeth. He wouldn't scream, he wouldn't give the Kingpin the satisfaction.

As if on cue, a railroad spike of pain cracked through his temple

He screamed so high and so loud it could be heard for three city blocks. Billy gripped the sides of his head, his hands sticky and hot with blood. He was being TORN APART like some fucking paper doll. *Paper knight. Zhilaohu (paper tiger).*

He didn't even know *what* he was yelling or which *language*, but he did know he was screaming something because his open mouth tasted dirt.

In some part of his mind, he knew that he had to be FLIPPING OUT literally on the pavement, but his body was being *snapped*, and he wore his brain was expanding like a damn balloon into his head.

AND.

He was *alone*.

Billy ripped the hair out of his head or maybe he *hadn't*. *He couldn't* separate what was REALLY happening. Blood flowed out his ears and down his neck like that leaky faucet in his old bathroom back in South Central.

His maman, her laugh. Her favorite red sequined outfit. Memere et grandpere and their lavender soap. That *forever* fucking long funeral. White carnations because who could fucking afford ROSES?

Maya holding his cold hand *promising* him they'd find the dealer sold it her.

Jerry and Maya cuffing and reading the rights that sick son of a bitch, Miguel Santiago, who killed *his Maman*.

The mirror he punched when he cockbag hung himself in holding. *Seven years bad luck*.

'Why didn't you look for me? Why did you disappoint me so much?'

His Maman, green eyes watery, gold hoops dangled from her ears.

'I didn't *know* you were using again! I fucking DIDN'T! You told me you'd be out past dawn... I TRIED in school, I helped Maya when I

could!' Billy yelled back. Maman, *Je t'aime!*

'You knew the Russians were back after we broke up their operation. Why didn't you and the others tell us where they were?' Maya, with her dark, curly hair buzzed short and her dark skin and equally dark eyes drilled into him.

'They kept *moving*! Bayani couldn't keep up with them, and he didn't speak *Russian*! Their rivals, the Colombians, couldn't find them either! Javier and I snooped for *weeks* and found out nothing!' Maya we tried our best!

His Maman and Maya... they REALLY blamed *him*?

'Your crew of seven...' His ribs cracked open and his heart plunged deep into his gut.

Javier and Marcus, bent in busted angles, slumped down in the seats of his Camaro in the school parking lot. Blood splattered across the seats.

No.

Javier and Marcus would never let *anyone* get the jump on them. Even if they DID they'd put up more of a fight. Javier could deadlift a motorcycle. And Ripley, Marcus' Doberman would rip the Calf muscles off any banger. He'd witnessed it *that* day with Max.

Bay, glassy eyed, crimson blood on his scarlet lips. Throat slit. Bay's curved Garab knife next to him on the asphalt, propped up against the front fender. His beloved braid sawed off.

Hindi kaya (can't be so)!

He'd NEVER let anyone cut his hair except Marcus. Also, Bay had *never* lost a knife fight, he was trained from his father since he could hold one.

Juedui bu (Absolutely NOT).

Mei splayed out in her favorite five inch snakeskin heels, long hair matted, her bloodied manicured hand reaching towards Hoonie. Not

his little sister. His first *real* friend.

Sang Hoon, face up, pistol across the pavement from him as if kicked from him, clothes sodden red. He'd never let ANYTHING happen to Mei, much less get disarmed.

Sasil-I anida (can't be true).

Max, curled up in front of Mei and Sang Hoon, skateboard at her side, wild copper hair slicked scarlet. She looked so small like a doll that had broken.

Not his WHOLE family.

IMPOSSIBLE.

Steve. Face down in front of his scab colored BMW, a pool of blood bigger than the half court circle. Glassy doe-eyes. Tangled brown hair. Those soft lips now red. Dead. Facing towards the Camaro.

Not his *King*.

He stood there. Himself holding Neil's knife, glimmering red. He'd never... ever EVER do this. *Not* to him. To THEM.

Billy bucked and shouted. He *wasn't* that guy, he WASN'T the monster that Neil repeatedly told him he was. He'd never *betray* his family like that.

He looked down at Steve again... lips busted open, cheeks swollen and bruised, his neck slashed and bloodied...

Wait.

Stop the fucking BUS.

He wasn't wearing maman's Saint Michael's pendant. Steve wouldn't have lost it. He CROWNED him with it, and the way Steve's eyes burned showed Billy he wouldn't take it off until he asked for it back.

This vision... was it like the fake ones that Baya would sometimes have, like the time he saw aliens?

Vivian said his Maman wouldn't have blamed him...Maya knew they tried to find them. Yeah... and why would his crew be in Hicktown?! Maybe none of this was fucking REAL. This spine splintering pain could be real, but maybe the rest *wasn't*?

He needed Baya. Baya had his back, SIEMPRE. ALWAYS. He needed him here, to guide him! FUCK. Baya's bright blue voice told him he was coming for him right before he fell down the K hole. Damn it Baya, I'd buy you all of that shitty Korean soju you liked so much if he just get this fucker out of his head!

Scraping lacerations tore down his sides. Billy's body jack knifed something inside him clamped down on his insides.

Ayudame, (Help me). God damn it, Loga hold it *together*. Claws, Talons, sharp and strong crushed in his skull in and ripped his scalp open. He couldn't see, feel, the smell of his own metallic blood filled his nose. It was shredding him open bloody, exposed and raw and he couldn't hold on.

ShhhzzzzLogazzzhhhstt Static buzzed through his head.

Then gold....a warm sunshine blanketed him.

Gold? Gold wasn't Baya's aura, Baya's was blue. Baya told him once everyone had their own aura, but he refused to tell anyone their own color. His mother's aura was dark red, Antoine's was pine green, But if this gold wasn't Baya... who else could it be?

'I got your back, fight, you're tough—' The presence definitely felt familiar, but the voice that hummed in his ears didn't really sound like Baya.

Talked too much.

It *had* to be Baya though. He was the oldest, he brought them all together and looked after them all.

Baya found him bruised after he got his ass kicked in preschool. He introduced him to an equally bruised and angry Mei. Soon after came animal lover, hilarious Marcus. Then smooth and serious Javier. Last was blunt and cutting Sang Hoon.

It was Baya who helped him pick out the color of his mother's urn. Merlot red. It was Baya who squeezed his shoulder for encouragement when he spoke at her funeral. He did the same for Maya's and Antoine's even though those scientists had *almost* found him.

If Baya was with him, he could fight back and check to see if the others made it. Even if EVERYONE back in Hawkins would rather him be DEAD hanging from a tree with his deviant secrets scrawled in marker than alive, he would survive in this hell just to *spite* those ignorant fucks.

And TOPPLE this kingpin.

'—Steady, you stay with—' The gold voice hummed. Billy roared and the empowering gold warmth gripped him tight and warm.

Billy still white-knuckled something warm and metal...his lighter. He swallowed, gritted through the crippling pain, and flicked it open. Even though his eyes were still squinted shut he could see plumes and pillars of fire dancing around his fist and up his right arm.

If this Bulgasari could manipulate his worst fears to steal his soul, he could fuck with his too! The Bulgasari talked to him for a *reason*. Tried to BREAK him for a reason.

Il est incassable (he was unbreakable)

He tried to dethrone the *wrong* King.

Like the warm ocean at high tide, the golden aura buoyed him to sit up. It enveloped him like the sweater his Memere knitted him that he never quite grew into. It had a sailboat on it and he remembered how soft it was, but he never wore it outside because it wasn't 'hard' enough.

Sailor Steve better not have been made into chest burster by that Alien.

'There we go Billy—' Since when did Baya call him Billy?! Didn't matter. He flexed his already tense muscles and reared up. He wiped his face free of either tears, blood or a rank combination of the two.

Jiayou (fight fight.)

'I'm gonna fucking ruin you.' Billy howled out like a Demon even though the Bulgasari still had its filthy fingers in his mouth, and ears trying to claw out his SOUL.

'I got your back, Billy.' Billy turned around to the glowing gold figure behind him. He pressed his forehead square to the bridge of Baya's nose. They did this each time they were about to knife spar. The gold figure stood taller than him, odd (kakaiba), because Baya was three inches shorter than him, five foot six. Baya must have been wearing those platform heeled boots he saved for special occasions like Pride, Halloween, or Masskara Festival (festival of smiles).

Billy brushed his face down across the face of glimmering gold and put his lips to its right ear.

"I got this fucker right where I want him. I can WIN thanks to you. I won't let you down." Billy murmured his vow into Bayani's ear. There had been times where he had let his family down before, but he wouldn't here. There was too much at stake.

NO ONE got in his head and fucked around with his own *psycho* mind and got away with it.

He wrenched his flaming right arm free of the pain branching across his nerves, and grabbed the shadowy arm needling his eyes and ear drums. Billy raged out with crimson fire at the shadow ghost who dare tried to *steal* his damn SOUL. It recoiled and away from him but he wasn't about to let it get away. *No*. His actions had consequences and he was going to teach this fuck a *valuable* lesson.

What goes around, *comes around*.

Vivian had to get her own life, never too late to be a nurse. She also had to make sure Erica didn't turn out like her aunt, but not a *pussy* like her brother either.

That Chief had to survive to not screw up the investigation into Neil. That'll wise Susan up *nice and good* so she could move the fuck on.

That headcase girl should probably have a shot at a *real* life. That and

have someone cook her real breakfast food, not that frozen *crap*.

Erica still had to see Nightmare on Elm Street, and show those other girls what *cool* really looked like.

He didn't really care what happened to Cabbage Patch, but if he meant that much to Steve then he should probably get out.

Steve.

If only he could tell Steve that he had never let anyone else wear that necklace. Not even Antoine. Billy HATED himself for his chest hitching when Steve showed him that he took his necklace from the crime scene. Steve thought of him. Merde...

Fuck that *sentimental* piss.

He just wanted to know what it felt like for Steve to tie him up with those crazy knots of his, and to return the favor by fucking him raw in the steamy passenger seat of his Camaro. He wanted that *raunchy* sex with Steve. Skin slicked and salty, slapping thrusts, Hair pulled taut, ropes in knots.

Steve promised he'd have his back even though he was an unhinged basket case. Even though he crossed one too many lines over and over. Even though everyone else thought, including himself, that he was some sort of monster...And he'd prove them RIGHT.

He was going to be the most horrific monster they'd never seen.

Luc William Loga was *wrong*, and fucked in skull, but he'd always act more WRONG and more FUCKED in the skull than anyone who tried to mess with him and his.

'Time to show me the goods you five cent slut.' Billy shouted, vicious, sharp, and deep.

The shadowy kingpin shrank back into itself and Billy inhaled deep and blew. Fire spiraled out like a vortex. This had to be the spirit connection between them because he was pretty sure his eyes were still squinted shut.

As soon as the blue and golden fire hit that Poltergeist bitch, Billy saw Steve's backyard and his rich kid pool. Next was Byers' shitbrick shack of a house. Last, those creepy dead woods between their houses.

Below the dirt, all knotted up was a pulsating heart straight out of some sort of Evil Dead movie. Billy couldn't make this shit up and he doubted Steven King could either.

A flash of Steve with his Saint Michael's glowing gold around his neck. He looked...MENACING which was definitely a *new* look for King Steve. He had the heart in hands and... was that... was that *steam* shooting out his hands? Yeah, piping hot steam. Little Hickshit was there too, hands like a lighthouse bubbling the veins and gooey shit around the heart.

Then...papillons de couleur arc-en-ciel, rainbow butterflies. Light and bright, the opposite of what Javier saw when his Maman, Maya, and Antoine kicked it. The butterflies swarmed the heart like hornets would, devouring it. Là m̃a (Freaky).

Oh, he was gonna EAT that fucker's steamed *heart* with mashed potatoes after *this*.

Now... time to jet.

Shit.

Billy couldn't feel any part of his body.

Different voices, all far away, echoed around him. Fucking annoying. Ta gueule (Shut up)!

Louder noises. Voices.

'ut him down!'

'ardiac arrest?'

'not breathin—'

'the fuck happened?'

'Billy, don't you *dare*—'

Anda a cagar (get lost), he wasn't having a fucking heart attack.... Those only happen to old people who eat slop, like Sherriff Slushie.

But something was napaka mali (very wrong).

Did the Bulgasari actually take his SOUL from his body? DICK MOVE.

Don't panic Loga. If he could steal an ambulance and use it for a getaway burglary of a payday loan place, he could fucking get his psycho mind back in his body. He concentrated and the darkness focused out a bit. The bright gold glow was still there, next to it was a small lavender one, a big, dark blue one in the back, a tall purple one, a small round leaf green one, and a thin ice blue one.

And a fading...hot pink one?

Instinct told him that was him. Is that why Bayani never told him the color of his aura was because it was David Bowie via Aladdin Sane PINK?!

Cào ni mā (mother fucker). He was vaulting this information and taking it to the *grave*.

But his grave wouldn't be HERE.

He urged himself closer. Swimming or some shit.

The gold glow was pulsing behind the pink aura

He was closer, but Goddamn was this *tiring*. Yawn. No. He couldn't *nap* here. Something told him he didn't have much time.

The tall purple one now bent over his aura.

Just a little closer. Basketball court length. Half court. Top of the key. Under the rim. He reached out and touched the edge of the rapidly fading pink glow.

Like lightning, his pulse thrummed through him all the way down to his toes. His eyes still stung like he got acid thrown in them, and his

ears still throbbed, but he'd take this over having his mind out of his body *any day*.

Something was pushing his chest HARD down over and over. ARRÊTEZ! STOP!

He hacked up more wet shit that he hoped wasn't blood, but it tasted metallic so it probably fucking *was*. The pushing finally stopped. Por fin (finally).

"Told you he'd make it. Now you owe me a new bracelet making set." Girl's voice, relieved, Little Hickshit?

"What if he's a spy for the Mind Flayer now?! Just like Will was?!" Spy? Who said that, Cabbage?

He weakly managed to lift his right middle finger

"Spy that, cabbage patch." Billy wheezed. "Putain. Jesus Christo. gàn nǐ mā...fuck..." Billy gasped out, he couldn't catch his breath, it was like his lungs hadn't worked in years.

He heard someone laugh. Erica.

"He's OK. The Master doesn't have him." Creepy girl.

"Yeah, I don't think we need to worry about that, Dustin." Man's voice. Sheriff. He blinked open his eyes a few times and saw nothing but dull, murky blurs.

Billy tried to sit up, but his body just wasn't gonna have it.

"Easy Billy. You didn't have a pulse for a good few moments there." Vivian's voice soothed him from his left, but her words didn't.

He died *again*? This was getting fucking OLD. What was he? Un Gato con nueve vidas (cat with nine lives)?

"Cheating the reaper. Call it a *hobby*. ssin-daeng (damn)." Billy swallowed, throat hoarse. A hand on his right shoulder trembled a bit, a hand with long nails, like acrylic press-ons Mei loved.

But Vivian didn't have her nails done, and she was to his left.

"Practice your less dangerous hobbies, like cooking or basketball." Vivian added. Billy blinked his eyes into focus and saw four a bit more clearly.

Erica was next to her mom near his legs. Creepy girl was across from Erica staring emptily at him like a doll. Christ. Cabbage Patch was at his feet, scribbling something in his notebook. If he was writing about *him*, he'd steal that from him and *burn* it. The Sheriff was behind Cabbage but he couldn't see his face from his angle even though he was sort of propped up on...his jacket? A pillow kinda deal? And something else? A jacket?

"You're a mess. You need a shower and a change of clothes." Now that was Erica.

"Says the runt with half a hairstyle..." He was forgetting someone important.

Steve!

"Where's Steve, what happened?" He tried to sit up again but all he did was move his neck.

"Behind you. And that's what we'd like to know." Chief good news reported in. His body relaxed, Steve was alright.

Billy finally struggled up to his elbows. He looked down at his chest, there was a lot of blood on his knotted shirt. His face and neck felt sticky but otherwise he felt *fine*. Royally pissed off and thirsty, but good to go.

Merci a deus (thank the gods).

"It was pretty cool, even for you. You were bleeding all over the place, from your *ears* and *eyes*, and you were saying a lot of stuff that definitely *wasn't* English. Like you were *possessed*, I wasn't scared thou —" Cabbage Patch babbled on worse than Susan about her damn knitting club.

"Friends *don't* lie." Doll girl interrupted.

"Fine, maybe I was a *little* scared ONLY because Steve ran towards you! For all I knew he was next! But NO, Steve was *awesome* and turned his armor on and helped you up and BOOM you were all on fire, like seriously ALL on fire like the *human torch* and the Mind Flayer made this like screaming noise like 'Yeeeeeeeeeeee'. Just like extras in those bad action movies and they all ran off." Billy rolled his eyes and looked at his hands. They were covered in his own blood and hair. RANK.

Yeah, he needed a shower, and a less humiliating life.

"Fucking hell, the Bulgasari got away. Classic Loga fuck up." Billy cursed.

"Billy you *didn't* fuck up, you drove it off. You *won*." Steve's thick voice sounded for the first time, and the hand on his shoulder squeezed. Nails pricked slightly through the denim.

"I'll win when I eat its heart, Steve." Billy coughed a bit, and glanced over at the hand.

Shénme. Tā. mā de. What. The. Fuck.

His hand had curved, polished black claws where nails should be, and shimmering golden scales where there should be skin. Not slimy like fish scales, but smooth like a snake's but larger and spade shaped. He put his left hand on it out of curiosity and it the scales felt smooth and hard, like police issued knife-resistant armor hard.

He turned slowly and looked up at Steve.

Billy's blood stopped short.

Steve quirked a weak, almost self deprecating smile.

He had scratches across cheek, blood smeared on his forehead, and his lip was busted a little, but otherwise his face looked the same.

But that was basically it.

Shimmering gold scales wrapped around the nape and sides of his neck. They faded to the same color of champagne that Antoine stole

to christen the Camaro with. The scales covered the front of his neck and continued down under the collar of his Tshirt. The gold scales started again down the outside his arms, and his underarms were armored in the champagne color.

He looked damn DELICIOUS in gold. Like...DAMN.

Oh Hindi (Oh no....)

That gold aura wasn't Bayani, it was *Steve*.

Steve had his back. Steve grounded him so he could fight back. Helped ease the pain.

He said that *sappy* stuff into STEVE'S ear.

Merde.

"Isn't it *cool*? Steve really IS a Paladin, just like in our campaign! Only I don't know if he can heal people or not bu—" Billy tuned out Cabbage, and studied Steve.

Mei, when she'd get particularly high on a *good* strain of reefer, would tell him the myth about a fish that turned into a golden dragon. It was her *favorite* myth because she had a girl boner for koi fish, thought they were lucky, or auspicious.

Steve reminded him of that myth.

"It first happened when the bats attacked. One swooped down and tried to take a chunk out of my shoulder, but... this happened and I didn't feel a thing. The, uh, scales or armor went away pretty quickly. Then they came back covering my right arm when it threw that ambulance at us." Oh, so that's why he grabbed his left arm with his left all awkward. "It's nothing." Steve was trying his best to sound nonchalant, but the tone in his voice gave him away.

He knew *embarrassed* and *anxious* when he heard it. Like what he told Erica, being special *wasn't* good. It SUCKED and he was probably worried about what Princess Nancy and that Voyeur freak Byers would think if they saw him. Or hell, maybe he even cared what Tommy Harris thought.

Bien sûr (of course) He'd ruin their dumbhick lives if they dared blab anything and get Steve in hot water with the scientists.

"Told you I was usually right: Steve 'Knight in Shining Armor' Harrington." Billy smiled all sassy. He loved being right, almost much he loved good booze.

Oh, they still had that bottle of anejo!

"You called me useless Paper Knight!" Steve retorted, pissy. Good, better than *sad*.

"Obviously, that was back before when you were soft and preppy, like... Springsteen. Now you're hard and gaudy like Vince Neil." Billy clicked his tongue, and Steve just rolled his and let out a long sigh.

"Oh, *fuck you*. Pick yourself up." Steve's voice sounded fake-pissed. He pricked down on his shoulder with his claws to pinch him on purpose, but not to cut.

The upwards tilt of his busted lip upwards when he stood up told Billy he *liked* the joke.

"Compliment, King Steve. Motley Crue's 'Shout at the Devil' is one of the..." Billy remembered and bolted up, almost blacking out from the head rush.

"Billy, slowly." Vivian warned and Billy made a face, trying to remember everything. He swayed a bit and Steve steadied him so he wouldn't stumble. His scales and claws were already fading back into that normal, smooth skin he wanted to leave dark hickeys all over.

"I know what the The Kingpin is. It's a Mul Gwishin, A Korean Water Demon that steals souls. He calls himself the Bulgasari which in Korean means 'unkillable'. They eat metal and control nightmares, though I think here, he can throw metal too. He plays mind games too. He got into my head and tried to take my soul or something straight out of a horror flick." Yeah it was starting to all come back now.

"It tried to take Will's soul too. It *possessed* him!" Cabbage piped in and Billy clicked his tongue.

"*That* explains a lot. Poor kid, stuck with that *whackadoo* family, and a Demon in his head." That earned him a stern look from Sheriff No-salad. "That cowardly puta uses your fears against you. Anything spoken or thought, dead or alive, real or that nerd *fantasy* shit you geeks do instead of going outside, it can *create*." Billy tried in vain to rub the drying blood off his neck when Vivian handed him a hanky. Matched the one Little Hickshit gave him earlier.

"Yes. It knows me. My fears, the monsters. He showed me things, like a movie." The creepy girl nodded. Perfect, only the craziest one believes him.

"Bullseye. It's why those bats came, my older brother told me a story about a Bat God called Camaztoz that I mentioned to Vivian. Erica mentioned Alien before you all showed up. It *learns*." Billy finished and Erica's eyes went wide and she put a hand on her mouth.

"Older bro—" Cabbage's mouth closed.

"Great. Well, any ideas on how to beat something that can *read our minds*?" Sheriff Marshmallow gruffly lit a cigarette.

"Will was able to see what the Mind Flayer saw, they were like spies for each other." Ok, so maybe Cabbage wasn't so deadweight after all. If *he* believed this, then Steve would *have* to hear him out.

"Step ahead of you, Cabbage. I know how to kill it." Billy flashed his teeth, and ran a tongue across them.

"DUSTIN! I'm DUS" Dustin's mouth shut again, as if by magic.

"How?" the creepy girl asked sharp as a whip. Oh, *she* shut his mouth. Ha.

"It showed me *my* greatest fears, so I got him to show me *his*. It has one ugly, gnarly heart underground in that woods in between your—" he pointed to Steve "place, and the Byers'. It even showed me how to make it stop beating." Billy itched for a cigarette, but figured his lungs had enough for one day because he was still short of breath.

"Me and You? We kill it?" Creepy girl pointed to him and herself. Billy shook his head.

"No. *Those* two." He jutted his chin out and pointed to Erica and Steve. "Erica's gotta use her light and Steve's gotta...I don't know... use steam? Most of my family believes in the Colombian myth that you see black butterflies before someone dies. Here, Erica and Steve make rainbow butterflies that eat the heart. Le contraire." Billy winced, just then realized he had mentioned his family *twice* and spoke French again.

"ME? I don't even know how *this* happens yet!" Steve gestured to all of him. Billy fought the urge to be turned on because in that moment he just wanted to *jump* him.

"I'm learning to control mine better. You'll get it. You're smart, you can fix cars, and sail a damn boat, *captain*." Billy said matter of fact. He didn't know shit about sailboats, but he knew they were complicated from Baya.

"You joking again?" Steve made a face. With that weirdly sexy gold hand of his, he thumbed towards himself and his eyebrows shot to his hairline, shocked. What, he *miss* something?

"He's being *sarcastic*. What does he know anyway?" Cabbage just threw Steve under the bus and Billy didn't like it because he *wasn't* being sarcastic.

"WRONG." Erica scoffed. "Billy *meant* it, NERD. Steve's *real world* smart, like Billy. Billy knows a LOT. He can speak all sorts of languages. Like Chinese, French, Tanga something, Spanish, and what the Poltergeist speaks, Korean." Erica bragged, hand on her hips. She certainly had a mouth on her like Mei.

"No way he speaks all those, pest!"

"Yes way, puta! You heard him!"

"Both of you stop and...I think he does speak them, Dustin. And we're off topic, let's just get inside." Sheriff Salisbury steak pinched the bridge of his nose. Billy narrowed his eyes. Why would he believe Erica? What did *he know*?

They all began to amble their way back to the hospital.

Vivian was harshly whispering something into Erica's ear. Probably trying to get her to stop cursing in Spanish.

"Loga. You're good. Strong." That made him jump. He forgot that creepy girl knew his last name.

Should he press or just let it slide?

"Whatever." He replied. He didn't have the energy to mess with Special Olympiad.

"C'mon Jane, let's get you bandaged up." Sheriff pulled her away from him. Billy began to think that the Chief was keeping something from him.

Maybe he was just too high strung and paranoid. He needed a shower and a nap. Brush his teeth again. Something fucking *normal*.

Cook that chili.

"Billy, about what you said earlier..." Steve was putting back on his jacket, and Billy didn't even realize he was still out there. Temptation was too high with them out here by themselves to not shove his tongue down his throat. He picked up his jacket too.

"Gonna have to be a bit more specific." Billy replied honestly.

"I won't let you down either." Time stopped. Billy's heart skipped a few beats and his mouth became sand dry. He was sure this meant SOMETHING more. RIGHT? Billy decided then and there to try to be soft and nice. Maybe Vivian was onto something, maybe he was making things too hard for no damn reason.

"Steve, you're the only thing that gets me *up*." Billy grinned, winked bright and shifted his hips ever so slightly, but oh so salaciously.

Steve groaned, flushed, and muttered something under his breath. Billy grinned and stretched, popping his joints. He couldn't resist.

He liked working Steve up WAY too much to be NICE.

Notes:

oooooooo this was a long time coming!

I made it extra long for the delay.

Not too many notes here. Except the bulgasari, Camazotz and the gul gwishin are real, i just tweaked a few things about them.

And yeah, bring on ALIEN!

And yes, Steve has a super power. Not even sorry. Not a little bit.

Also, yes, butterflies are a theme. they were a lyric in the song that Erica sang to revive Billy. There is also a reason i keep almost killing him. You'll see.

and what about Bayani, huh?!

Next chapter will focus more on Dustin, Steve, Erica and El. Don't worry, I haven't shelved their characters.

I decided to end this chapter on a high note...because well. we still have one hell of a roller coaster yet to go folks!

thanks for reading!

-TL

7. A Tarnished Shield

The Paper Knight and the Killing Tree

Chapter Seven: A Tarnished Shield

Steve was officially screwed. Just write his will and testament now.

"Shoot me. Hop should just shoot me now." Steve muttered to himself as Billy did some *swerve type* movement with his hips that he didn't think guys could EVEN DO, not to mention *that well*.

What *else* could he do that *well*?

He *didn't* just think that.

He did NOT just THINK that!

Steve's palms itched to grab Billy's hips, he clenched his fists instead.

There was no mistaking the twinge, the tingle that sparked down there....Billy, despite like covered in blood and swamp muck, aroused him. *Hard*. He was half-mast down there. And Billy hardly did anything! He didn't even TOUCH him. His body was *betraying* him while Billy was just fucking around and *torturing* him.

Why BILLY?! OF ALL PEOPLE? This was so fucked up. Steve really, really wanted to just blame this on the Upside-Down. On how exhausted he was. On how he didn't really care about *Billy*, it was just the principle that *no one* deserved to be here.

But,

It wasn't those things. Denial was a river in Africa. Or some saying like that.

If it was Jonathan who was here, or Tommy, or even that babe Vanessa in his English class he wouldn't feel this turned ON.

Probably not *even* Nance.

It was that '*I can do this just watch me*' attitude. His '*fuck you and your mother*' taunts. This jackass even thought he was smart. SMART.

How in the?...if only Billy knew how easy sailing a boat was once you got the hang of it. Or the one time he messed it up and it nearly killed him. Should have killed him.

Well, none of it mattered because it wasn't gonna be a THING anyway.

Steve had always known that he fell *fast*, and with the notable exceptions of Nancy and Davie, got bored *equally* fast.

He hoped this would be the case here.

But seeing how his life was turning out currently, he didn't think he'd be that lucky.

His mind flashed to Billy eased out on the hood of that car like a damn invitation, cackling and smiling.

Steve had NEVER heard laugh like that or seen him smile like that in Hawkins. It pissed him off that even though he was on the receiving end of the laugh...he didn't *mind* it.

In fact, he wanted to make it happen again.

He was so FUCKED.

"What can I say, I'm a work of art, while you're just a real piece of work." Steve finally retorted back. There was NO way, even though Billy was gay, could like him *back*.

Like back. CHRIST STEVE.

One, he almost KILLED him. The *vulnerable*, open look on Billy's face had been seared into his mind. Billy wasn't *ever* supposed to look like that.

'*Just FINISH me off with that bat, Harrington. I know you want to, shining knight...Here is where demons play.*' That defeated look chilled Steve's blood still. Just like at the quarry, he made Billy want to give

up.

Billy thought he wanted him dead. Try the exact opposite you stupid fucking idiot.

When the unstoppable force of nature that was Billy Loga started to puke and his eyes glazed over and then rolled back in his head and that foam spit happened in the corner of his mouth, Steve very nearly LOST his SHIT.

He couldn't have...he couldn't have killed the person he came here to *save*. Not *another* guy he liked. Not AGAIN.

Second reason Billy couldn't like him back, was he was definitely NOT Billy's type. Antoine looked *cool* and was ripped.

Steve had lost his *cool* cred a while back, and slacked at gym recently.

Three, he now literally might not even be human anymore. Scales?! CLAWS.

Cool. *Scratch that*, he entered FREAK category. If Billy thought Jonathan was a freak he didn't even WANT to know what he thought of *him* now.

When it first happened he didn't even recognize his own arm. When he put two and two together it *was* his own arm he may have... well... He may have BLAMED Billy. Which looking back wasn't fair. It wasn't his fault.

Billy had done nothing but fight tooth and nail against the monsters here.

And save his ass from being turned into a smear on the road from the front end of an ambulance being thrown at him. At first he was terrified Billy had been clipped by the ambulance, it was a close shave.

But Billy's blonde head lifted up, eyes roving across his face making sure HE was alright. Of course he was, he was further away from it, and had like, freak-show scaly armor.

"Work of art, like a museum? You aren't gonna have a lot of fun with the 'look, but can't touch' approach, King Steve." Billy's eyes flashed and goosebumps prickled up his triceps.

Was the cold getting to him again?

"It's called having standards. Can't have just anyone pawing at the goods." Steve quipped back. He didn't know how Billy *did it*. How he could be so sure, so *confident* about fighting something that seemed... well unkillable (Steve wasn't sure that was a word, immortal maybe?).

Billy said something back, but Steve didn't hear it. A sharp pick of pain darted through his mind... and static. Loud static like from a TV that was turned all the way up and on a scrambled channel.

Sssshzhzhzzhzhz

Steve winced and out his fingers to his right temple.

StevevdhdjStevesjskakz

Was... was he hearing VOICES?! Were they saying his name?!

More fuzzy, loud static and Steve tried his best to appear natural. Don't panic. Sleep deprivation. That's *all* this was. This was *fine*.

Breathe.

Steve looked up and saw the Billy looking around for something. He knew for what too. The knife.

Wait...how did he *know* that?

Steve crossed the pavement and picked up the knife and held it fast. What? Steve's pulse began to hammer and sting in his chest.

He didn't know where the knife was before. How did he know *now*, and why did he get it?!

He gripped it and held it blade out like he had done this before thousands of times. He hadn't outside the kitchen when making yet

another dinner for one when his parents were out. If he wasn't trying so hard to play it cool that Billy was lounged out naturally in the passenger seat HIS car, he would have told Billy that he could also cook a mean chili.

YSSSHZDHHHSZZYES THE SWORD! Then a chill ran through his arms down his sides.

"Looking for something?" Steve asked. But didn't ask. *He* didn't...think to say that.

Something was going ON. Steve tried to drop the knife, but just like in a dream, he didn't have control.

'The Waterslayer is mine. Get rid of the Firedancer, next the Lightsinger, then the Gatebuilder, or they will get rid of Waterslayer.' Was he referring to him as the Waterslayer? The Mindflayer KNEW about what he did to Davie?

No...It couldn't be....

The Mind Flayer was in his head!

WAS HE POSSESSED?! FUCK.

The mind flayer was IN CONTROL OF HIS BODY.

Steve's chest cramped up in acidic panic. He had to *run*.

He stood fast.

A shiver shook down his entire body.

"Already found what I'm looking for." Billy turned and sauntered over and Steve's chest filled with a blizzard of dread. He adjusted the grip on the knife.

GET BACK, Billy! I'm not FLIRTING. He couldn't say the words.

"Yeah, I know you have." Steve's voice fired back. That wasn't *him*. He had to fight this. Had to STOP. Steve could feel the blood flood his face, straining to shout back at him.

Billy furrowed his eyebrows a bit then smirked.

"Oh, what do you think *that* is, King Steve? 'cuz I'm coming over to get *it*." Yes.

NO. NO. NO.

'We have the Firedancer right where we want him. Entice him close, then kill.'

RUN BILLY, RUN.

Steve tried to move, speak, ANYTHING but *nothing* was happening. Drop the knife, Steve. Drop the *damn* knife.

He flipped it once and caught it by its handle. Steve wasn't that good with knives; Billy was. Billy looked like he had been TRAINED to fight with one. The Mind Flayer saw Billy fight with it and was *copying* him.

"Oh, I don't know about that. You're getting soft, aren't you? I heard what you whispered in my ear. You needed *me* to beat the Bulgasari." Steve smirked cold and Steve's mind petrified in horror. He could still feel buzz of Billy's full lips against his ear.

No... don't use *that* against him.

It wasn't even TRUE. He didn't even do anything except help stand him UP.

"What the fuck?" Billy paused. YES. Get out of HERE or HIT ME.

Steve tried to flex his muscles, open his mouth give ANY sign this wasn't him, but it wasn't working.

"I bet you can't even knife fight. It's just for show, like everything else is about you. The muscles, the car, your... slutty clothes. You're the Paper Knight, not *me*." Steve managed to whisper the last Words. He tried to bite the inside of his cheek from saying anything else.

Billy *had* to know this wasn't him. He HAD to know that's *not* what he thought. Who would ever think that Billy was a 'paper knight'?! It

couldn't be further from the truth.

The barely restrained fire in Billy's eyes said a different story. DAMN It, Steve get a grip!

"You've hit your fucking head, Harrington. I'm going inside." Fuck. He called him by his *last* name. He had started calling him Steve when he wasn't pissed at him. It was something Steve had caught onto.

Steve's hand that gripped the knife began to shake. *Drop the knife*. He could get himself back.

His left hand went to the chain around his neck.

Steve's heart skipped three beats. Not the pendant Billy put around his neck. He still got the tingles down *there* whenever he remembered Billy delicately placing it on him. He wanted to keep it safe.

He yanked it to break it, but the chain burned his hand and held fast.

Steve hissed, as his left arm lifted the chain over his head and spiked the St Michael pendant to the rancid ground.

"You're trying to pop shit with *me*?" Billy turned around, sure and slow like a shark would smelling blood.

He didn't MEAN it. This wasn't HIM. Steve tried to bend down and pick it back up, but instead he sneered.

"I know your sick, deviant secret. You're a filthy, lowlife faggot." Steve's heart jumped into his throat and his stomach cramped up jagged. He'd NEVER even THINK that about him.

This *had* to be some sort of nightmare.

Billy, all red and rage, jacked back and swung his right fist in a tight hook. Steve didn't blame him, but to his body moved on his own and he twisted to effortlessly dodge the punch. The Mind Flayer moved him quicker than he could move *himself*. Steve didn't know if he should feel even worse or not.

Steve switched the grip on the knife with a fancy flip, and thrust

forward with the knife right at Billy's exposed, toned stomach.

FUCK.

"How the-" Billy pivoted at the last minute, shocked and confused. Steve had never felt more relieved.

"STEVE! I think Billy might be right about you and Erica! Remember our campaign against the Changling Wraith!? You distracted the Wraith. Max banished it, but now Max's character is Billy. Lucas was polymorphed, but now Lucas' character is Erica. It's the SAME as the campaign, but the roles are all switched around." Dustin! No. No, No! NOT NOW.

Steve finally got his back to cooperate and he doubled over, grabbing his right wrist with his left hand.

His left arm, even though his new weird lizard power healed the demo dog bite, itched.

"Get away...It...!" Steve rasped out through clenched teeth. He would NOT let this ghost possess him and STAB his friends. He was stronger than that. He HAD to be.

He wasn't weak like he *used* to be.

"Steve what are you doing?! Why do you have Billy's knife? What did that jockbrain do now?" Dustin accused and Steve's thoughts just flooded with the notion of putting the knife into his chest. NO.

He took a shaky step towards Dustin, his body felt a thousand pounds of lead.

STOP PLEASE.

Billy swung at him again, and Steve ducked and side-kicked him a few feet away. Billy staggered, barely keeping on his feet and studied Steve like a trig problem Steve would always have to ask for Nancy's help on.

"I'm...not-" Steve struggled with the static in his mind. "You're pathetic. You're of no help. You're always in the way, and you're

never going to get out Lucas' shadow." The air in Steve's lungs turned to stone. He didn't just say that to *Dustin*. The smart, caring, too damn curious little brother who looked up to him.

"Steve, what?! You can't really mean that." Steve's body already did a quick two-step and front kicked Dustin down to the ground.

"Ow wha-" Dustin bit it and his notebook went flying.

He turned towards Billy, left hand white knuckling his own right wrist.

"Harrington you're out of your *fucking* mind. What's wrong with you?" Billy had his fists up, but Steve could tell he looked way more confused than pissed off at this point.

'Run him though, he won't ever take you seriously anyway. He won't ever like you or want you. He just finds you entertaining because you're the only other guy here in my domain.' Steve pushed out the Mind Flayer's jabs. He knew manipulation when he heard it, no matter how true it could be. He knew the Mind Flayer was trying to break his concentration. Steve bit the insides of his cheeks to keep from speaking. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes from resisting charging Billy with the knife.

It didn't matter that he didn't like him back. He came to the Upside-Down to SAVE Billy.

And he WOULD.

"I'm not...ME. *It* has me. Kingpin. *Please, Billy.*" Steve finally got out, and he hardly cared that it sounded like a whine and a plea. Billy's eyes widened blue and bright and his lips parted. Good he got it.

As his luck would have it, Steve lost concentration and the Mind Flayer got back control. He lunged forward to run Billy through.

"Fuck *this*." Billy cursed and he rolled right and with Steve's momentum flung him hard to the pavement and pinned him to it. Steve breathed a sigh of relief through the wave of fresh pain. He couldn't do anymore damage.

He...well, now couldn't do much of *anything*.

Steve finally was able to drop the knife and instantly it skidded away from him. El maybe?

Billy was spouting something in another language that Steve couldn't understand, but it definitely didn't sound like he was saying anything *good*. Then again, why would he be saying anything good to him? He wasn't the one *weak* enough to get possessed by the damn Mind Flayer. Billy fought back and won, and what did Steve 'shining knight' Harrington do?

Got possessed, kicked Dustin to the ground, and almost killed Billy again. Some protector he turned out to be.

Paper Knight. Billy was *right*.

"The Master has Steve. Like Will, but *worse*." El said and Steve could see Hop's police boots and Mrs. Sinclair's tennis shoes.

"It HAS him?" Hop sounded incredulous.

"Steve had Billy's knife and was like, fighting with it! And he kicked me to the ground, not that it hurt or anything, but he'd *never* do that. We're friends, like brothers even." Dustin sounded ok, but Steve knew better. Dustin was more sensitive than he let on and FUCK. Why didn't he realize before he picked up the knife that he had been possessed?

He was such a *fuck-up*.

"Momma, this is some bulhaeng. The Poltergiest tried to possess us, Billy and I, before when it ate the truck." Great, the Poltergeist failed to possess a *nine year old girl*, but managed to possess him.

He struggled some against Billy, but then his body stopped moving all together. Had to be El. The static in Steve's ears continued, like when he tried to watch channels on TV, but the signals got crossed.

"Possess you? LORD ALMIGHTY, Erica you did NOT mention this to me, nor whatever you can do with your hands. Now you will tell me the truth of what's really going on." Mrs. Sinclair sternly ordered, no-

nonsense style. He thanked his stars some of the attention was off him.

He was waiting for Billy to lay into him. He could feel his knee on his lower back, his hot hand death gripping his wrist behind his back.

"This just went from bad to worse. We'll figure something out. C'mon, Billy, let him up." Steve heard Hop but for the first time being in the Upside-Down he was petrified. Of *himself*. Panic swelled his throat and he tasted metal. Blood. He must have bit down on his cheek so hard he finally drew blood.

"No. Don't. That's what it wants." Steve's whole body twitched and through the cold he couldn't feel his toes.

"Don't shit your pants. I won't let you kick Cabbage over again." Billy sounded gruff as he hauled him up.

Steve immediately started to struggle, but Billy and El held him fast in place. With Billy behind him he couldn't see his face, but he knew he was pissed.

One step forward, two steps back. Just his style.

"Steve, it's ok. Don't worry. I'm already working on a plan. A GOOD one. I researched all this after it happened to Will the first time. You just won't be able to know about it, you know, also being the Mind Flayer right now. But Will was possessed and now he is like, almost *totally* normal. Well, I mean, and you're older so you have a better chance of ending up *more* normal. You're STEVE." Steve swallowed. Yeah Dustin, might be a good idea to find yourself a less mentally unstable role model.

An icy blast waved over him and he shivered uncontrollably.

Did the Upside-Down just drop in temperature? Or was that just him?

Billy's strong hands holding him in place were near SCORCHING, but he didn't want him to let go.

"Sooooooooo, how do we that? Keep him from knowing? Lock him up?" Erica's eyes went wide and shifted up to somewhere behind him.

Billy. Then beside her. Mrs. Sinclair.

Pause.

"We are NOT sedating Steven. Not after what happened last time with Billy. It's a miracle Billy recovered that quickly. With my sister it could take days." Mrs. Sinclair stated sternly. She hadn't said that last time. So, that's also how she knew what to do when Billy overdosed.

"We can't have this *thing* knowing what we're doing either. We can... isolate him." Hop sounded reluctant. So it went from Billy being locked up to him being locked up.

He was dangerous.

He was out of control.

He was going to get them all killed.

Super.

"Do you hear the Master? Does he speak to you? Show you things?" El asked, eyes big and fearful.

Steve shook his head, lying. He didn't need El or anyone else to coddle him. He could downplay this. Yeah.

"So. Mind Flayer, Kingpin, whatever you call yourself. Don't make yourself too comfortable, we beat you once, we can beat you again." Hopper got in his vision.

As if mocking him, his mouth opened and he let out a dry, dark chuckle and cut a sharp look to Hop.

"You'll fail this daughter, just like you failed the last one, Sara. I'll make you watch her die." Steve flashed a cunning smile as his stomach plummeted to his feet.

The blood drained from Hop's face. God, just kill him or something, Hop and the rest didn't deserve this.

'You pray to *God*? No, I am God, and the Fire Dancer is MINE.' Steve

wincing and bucked over in an icy flash of pain. His skin prickled with goosebumps and his teeth chattered.

Was it just HIM that was so damn cold?

The Mind Flayer was yanking his body into different directions while Billy and El held him fast.

"Are these the types of things it's been saying to you this whole time, Billy?" Mrs. Sinclair rushed from his vision and Steve just chuckled lowly and thrashed against Billy who still hadn't said anything.

"If you didn't ignore your younger sister when she was a teen, she wouldn't have turned out the way she did, a misfit, convict *junkie*." Steve flashed another smile and Mrs. Sinclair's usual strong, composed face softened.

"Don't listen to it. It just talks shit." Billy said something else in another language that sounded like a curse.

"What shit did you say earlier about payback?! It's a *bitch* and I'm holding *his* leash." Steve taunted Billy, using his own words *against* him while at the same time calling *himself* a bitch.

This stupid Kingpin just had to go and get a sense of humor.

"Let's get one thing straight, you delusional, puta madre. One way or another, I'm taking you *out*. I told you, your fight is with *me*. I'm going to BREAK YOU." Billy hissed from behind him, and it didn't take a scholar like Nancy to figure out that Billy meant he would take Steve 'Babysitter failure extraordinaire' Harrington out to get to the Kingpin.

Could Steve blame them? He didn't know.

Thundering static boomed like a guitar amp through his mind and he managed to stop himself from yelling out. Overwhelming. Too much. Different voices screaming and crying and ice cracking and his own name and JUST STOP!

'You're useless, you couldn't even kill that Alien. Sure, you saved that bratty little bitch once, but you won't do it again. What good have you

really done here? Surely they don't really need you here.' Steve's face reddened. Jesus, this Kingpin could lay it on thick.

"Hey...he's not lookin' good."

"Do you ever say anything NICE? He's POSSESSED."

"No, Loudmouth, I mean his lips are blue!" Were they arguing AGAIN?

"He feels cold. I can feel him through the jacket." Billy murmured, hands shifting. Damn it maybe the most irritating part was that they were talking about him like he wasn't actually THERE.

'You're just a joke, why would they?' The static amplified and Steve winced hard. It was so loud it swarmed over his other senses, his vision greyed out. He wouldn't scream though. Billy had gone through worse. The Kingpin made him bleed from his EYES. He could weather this.

His left arm itched and ached, and he ignored it.

'Just like you weathered killing your first boyfriend, getting expelled from Wilton, losing all your friends, and the attempt, right?' Steve heard through the static and he scowled on instinct. He wouldn't let the Kingpin wear him down, even IF it was *right* about a few things.

The Upside Down was NOT going to dredge up THAT time in his life. He blocked it out. It *never* really happened. He never really *did* it. There wasn't going to be a repeat *performance*.

He didn't even have enough rope for a noose.

'Are you so sure about that?' Oh *fuck* this *noise*.

"You are-aren't going to w-wi-win, Kingpin." Steve knew his vocal chords said the words, but he couldn't hear the sound of his voice over the static. Hop, Mrs. Sinclair, Billy and the rest would find a way to kill this ghost yammering bullshit mind games in his head.

His muscles cramped, FREEZING.

Billy's hands burned him, BROILED him. He was probably leaving blistering BURNS.

Steve still couldn't hear much, but he did feel a hand on his forehead. Hot, not as hot as Billy's though. He looked up, it was Mrs. Sinclair and even though he couldn't hear her voice over the static, he could read her lips.

'Too cold.'

Oh. So, it WAS just him. *Duh*, Harrington, *Duh*.

'Cold like me. Like us.'

Six hours and twelve minutes ago

"He's got plenty of time to recover. Jane said she can't open a gate here; the Mind Flayer is still dampening her powers. Looks like Evel Knievel here is gonna get his wish, we gotta kill the Mind Flayer to get out of here." Hop grunted as they finally hauled Billy up into the second story hospital room. Second story in case he tried to make a break for it he at least had to run down the only flight of stairs.

"If that's supposed to make me feel better, it didn't." Steve replied, still nauseous.

"You didn't know, kid. You were just doing what you thought was right. Don't beat yourself up over it." Billy weighed a LOT more than he looked like he did, but thanks to his new weirdo snakeskin power, he had a bit more strength than he used to have.

"Again, easier said than done. Can I get a cigarette?" Steve needed something to calm his nerves after seeing Billy's eyes roll back into his head and foam burned at the corner of his mouth.

Hop shifted, frowned, muttered something about thinking he had more, and gave him one.

"There's no way you could have known, and he's been around the block before with drugs. I know the type." Hop lit Steve's cigarette before lighting his own. Steve took the barest of drags, he didn't

handle Hop's tobacco very well and didn't want to make an ass of himself coughing up the tobacco.

"Know the type?" He never remembered Billy doing any hard drugs at the parties he was at with him, but he never kept an eye out for it either.

Hop pointed to himself.

"He told me he's never shot up. I don't think he was lying." Steve defended, looking at Billy passed out. It was always weird seeing how innocent people looked when they were sleeping. Billy didn't look peaceful though. He looked half dead.

Hop nodded, and exhaled deep.

"Don't mean him, himself, *necessarily*. Vivian filled me in a bit on something Billy told her about his mother. I'm sure he'll tell you about it eventually." Steve wanted to ask more, but didn't. It wasn't his right to pry.

"I doubt he'll want anything to with me after this." Steve played with the pendant around his neck, still remembering how his skin warmed up from his gaze when he put it around him.

"You got a knack for having people opening up to you, kid. You two have gotten...*close*; you can tell he's self-destructive, manic too. Probably has what some of the soliders I was in combat with in Vietnam, have. *I* have. That new diagnosis. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD. He needs real help before he really does something he can't take back." Hop sighed deep and grave, but it reassured him that he thought he had a chance to make things right.

Had they gotten close? He still didn't know that much about him.

Steve just watched Billy's chest rise and fall.

He didn't kill Billy.

He didn't kill Billy like he had Davie.

"I don't know anything about PTSD, but I do know a thing or two

about things you can't take back." Steve exhaled his smoke, wishing he could blow a smoke ring like Billy.

"I don't think spray painting that stuff on the movie theatre marquee counts, kid." Oh, so Hop knew about that.

Steve shook his head.

"Not that bullshit. Though, that *wasn't* cool. I didn't always live here in Hawkins. I was at boarding school in Massachusetts until my freshman year." He picked up two ropes they had originally wanted to tie Billy up with, but Steve talked them out of. Again, he was pretty good at convincing people to do something when he wanted to.

He quickly looped the two ropes together, making a sheet bend. Things you can't take back.

"I used to sail. I was REALLY good for my age. One of the *few* things I'm actually *good* at. I had a *close friend*. Davie Scott. We were always *together*." Steve didn't know if Hop would pick up on his implication that friend was a bit more than just a *friend*, but went on anyway. "I went sailing in the Chesapeake Bay off the Eastern Shore of Virginia every year with his family." Steve began, not really knowing at first why he was doing it.

Maybe he needed to get something off his chest. Maybe he wanted Hop to know that Billy wasn't the only one in Hawkins with a black mark in his record.

"Memorial Day, five years ago, I had the idea of going out sailing on Davie's Bermuda sloop with him. Just us. It was supposed to be...*fun*." *Romantic* was unsaid because even Steve at that time didn't really GET that it was a DATE.

He just knew that he wanted to be with him with no one else around. So they could actually *kiss* without keeping one eye on the bedroom door.

"A quick storm rolled through, sheet went, I should have tied a sheet bend like this," Holding up the rope "instead of a square knot, but I

was just lazy. The boom caught Davie in the head and he went overboard. I went in after him and the whole boat turtled. Capsized." Steve still remembered trying to get Davie out, but he was thrashing and pulling him under the water. Steve could sometimes still taste the brackish bay water in his lungs. Davie's cries as the waves crested and they got tangled up in the strewn rigging.

He remembered trying so hard.

Davie's pale face stretched in terror, glassy hazel eyes, all those freckles, and his strong arms pulling him under.

Steve was an exceptional swimmer, just not when it *counted*.

Davie in the Chesapeake.

Barbara in his pool.

"I couldn't pull him out, we were all caught up in the rigging and Davie was disoriented from hitting his head....I don't remember much, but apparently a speedboat came by, they saw the keel of our boat up in the air. I don't know how they found us in the water through all the waves....I made it." Steve gestured to himself taking a drag that was almost too much for him to handle. "Davie didn't." He exhaled smoke through his nose.

"I killed him. That's something I can't take back." Steve looked down and Hop moved to his left.

"That was an accident, Steve." Hop put his hand on his left shoulder, the one not covered in scales. "You must have been what, *twelve, thirteen?* That's not on *you*. That's NOT your weight to carry." Hop made sense, and Steve's throat swelled despite himself. Steve's parent's blamed Davie's parents and boy was that a FIGHT.

And what came after wasn't *pretty* either.

Steve made a face and tapped the ash of his cigarette on the floor.

"My point is; I don't think I'm any good at helping anyone, Hop." Steve choked out, gesturing to Billy with the cigarette in one hand, knotted rope clenched in the other. Chest hitched. He didn't know

where this wave of emotion came from. He thought he had squashed it all away, drank it dead.

Hung it up.

"Sometimes you can't, kid. My *first* daughter, Sara, got really sick with cancer and I did all I could to help her, but it wasn't enough. I'm a black hole. I suck everything in. I took an oath to protect and serve, but the hard reality is, is that we're all human and we fail. Often times, we fail the ones we're closest to." Hop grimaced, exhaling a lungful of tobacco.

Nice pep talk Hop.

"But *you* are helping. You started the truck, killed the dogs, and I saw you protect Dustin from that bat creature. You're doing a *hell* of a job. Cut yourself some slack and get some *rest*, and if big, bad, badass wakes up on the wrong side of the bed, just holler." Hop finished his cigarette. Steve hadn't known he saw him step in front of Dustin to protect him with his new FREAK arm when that gargoyle came for him.

"You too, Hop. And I can handle Billy." Steve meant it. He wasn't going to let Billy go after the Mind Flayer by himself, or burn down the hospital in one of his rages.

"Probably one of the *few* who *can* or WANT to." Hop smirked cynically and put out his cigarette. Steve's smile was small, but real.

He flopped down in a sooty chair, his back pocket crinkled. He got out Billy's knife he tucked in the back of his belt. It was big, and it was crazy how well Billy could fight with it.

It was also crusted over in bat guts when he vaulted from the roof of his e23 onto the back of that bat like a movie stunt. He glanced at Billy now, unconscious, pale, curly hair matted on the pillow, lips barely parted. He took another drag.

"You're an exhausting, mixed-up guy, you know that? You show NO fear against mutant, man-eating bat creatures. You can now breathe FIRE and ENJOY carving up monsters. But we mention putting cuffs

on you, and you react like a mouse caught in a trap. I tranq you, and you look at me like a scared, hurt little kid. What *gives*? What's your *deal*?" Steve groaned miserably, exhaling smoke. He started to clean off the knife.

"Silent treatment. A first for you." Maybe he was going crazy talking to someone who was clearly passed out. He looked down at the clean knife. It already looked a bit dull. He put out the cigarette.

He reached out his scaly arm, most of the scales had gone away or retracted back, or whatever they DID, but the ones on his wrists and over the tops of his hands were still there. He wondered...

He ran the knife over his arm and it made a scraping, sanding sound. His scales were tougher than the knife. This...this might actually come in handy if they faced anything with claws again.

"I came here to *save* you, you stupid son of a bitch. I came here because..." Steve thought about it. "I don't know. At least when you're an asshole to me, I don't feel so...dead. And when you're a *decent* human being to me... I don't feel like total shit." Steve didn't know if that last part was true, maybe. He just kept running the edge of the knife over his scales until he finally got bored and put it on the table next to Billy.

Steve opened his eyes after he heard something soft hit against something. Wind, maybe a curtain?

He fell asleep!

He jolted up and damn did his neck HURT. The bed was empty. Knife gone.

FUCK.

He stood up and sharply hinged forward and just barely catching himself on the foot of the bed.

Did....did that asshole tie his SHOES together?

"Shit, shit, shit I fucking HATE this prick. Shit I *hate* him. Shit!" Steve quickly untied his shoes, tied them back together and sprinted down

the stairs to see everyone asleep but Hop.

"What?" Hop asked, confused and Steve furrowed his eyebrows. The window.

Billy climbed out a two-story window. OF COURSE HE DID.

"He climbed out the window. He's gone after it." Steve said, getting his keys from his e23 out of his jacket pocket.

"You shouldn't go alone I—" He stopped Hop with a hand.

"It's MY screw up, I'm gonna fix it. I'm bringing him back this time." Steve grabbed his bat on the way out and sprinted to his car, heart rate redlining.

Hop's truck was still there. That other ambulance he spotted was there too. Billy was on foot. Good.

He ripped open the door and prayed that his finicky BMW would start. JUST ONE MORE TIME START YOU PIECE OF JU—

It started and Steve gunned it.

He kept his eyes peeled. He had NO idea where Billy would go, but Billy wasn't exactly a *stealthy* ninja. He commanded attention wherever he was, especially when he wa-

"What in the..." Steve caught blonde out of the corner of his eye on the left and cranked the e23 so hard into a left turn he almost pulled a powerslide.

Billy was poised on the hood of some old Buick, eating. And....was that liquor...and groceries?!

Billy just turned into a domestic housewife and went grocery shopping instead going on some suicide mission to kill the Kingpin.

He had a feeling he was never going to be able to predict this colossal jackass.

At least he wasn't too little, too late, this time.

Present Time

Steve blearily came to, to blurry brown, black, and white smudge. Wha....

Erica?

"And that's when I beat Molly Mitchell in orienteering. She was so mad she threw her compass and broke it. You'd like the girl scouts, you can even join my troop. If we team up, we can for sure sell the most cookies, especially since your dad eats a lot of sweets, right?" Steve blinked a few times...what happened? Why did it feel like he was naked outside in the dead of winter?

"Cold." He muttered... Oh...he was under....like a hundred blankets.

Static itched in his mind, but it seemed far away.

"Hello Steve!" El. She and Erica both were eating waffles. Eggos.

"What happened?" Steve asked, words still a bit slurred. The Mind Flayer still had him, he just wasn't...chatty. Dormant or something. But there.

"You passed out because you got really cold really fast. My momma didn't drug you like you did Billy. I knew you'd wake up, you're tougher than you look. You took on Alien by yourself, after all." Erica took another bit of her eggo. Syrup dripped from it.

"The Mind Flayer..." Steve struggled to find the words.

"We think the Poltergeist still has you. Loudmouth thinks it's making you cold like this. He said Will liked the cold when the Poltergeist had him last." Erica said simply, like it was a completely normal thing to say. But...this was the Upside Down...so.

"The Master is stronger. Instead of you liking the cold, the Master *makes* you cold." El spoke and Erica nodded. They were talking about him like he was...

Already doomed.

"Yeah...where..." Who did he ask for first? The little brother he kicked down and tormented? The police chief he mocked for having a dead daughter? The woman he insinuated screwed up her sister's life?

The guy (*friend?!)* he had a one-sided *thing* for who he viciously insulted?

Steve took a good look around. Flower wallpaper. They weren't in the hospital.

"...are we?" Safe bet.

"Ppfffft Nice try Poltergeist. Not answering your questions." Did Erica just sass him?

"I'm not the Poltergeist...Mind Flayer right now..." He moved his hand...*jerk*.

He was *tied* to the BED?!

He tried each limb weakly. YUP.

"You and the master are together." El put two halves of her Eggo together. UGH He knew she didn't mean it like that...but the *innuendo*.

"We aren't...Well, we're on a break...." He couldn't really deny it.

"Hmm...maybe the plan *did* work. I'll try anyway. What are you up to? Poltergeist? Why do you want He-Man and I? What are you planning with us?" Erica crept closer. Oh was this the good cop, bad cop routine?

"OH MY GOD. Are you TRYING to TALK to it? I knew leaving you with STEVE was a bad idea. You're the WORST." Dustin burst into the room. "And El?! You're LETTING her?"

"We're friends, and we compromised." El held out her wrist. A bracelet made of some sort of string hung from it.

"Traitor!" Dustin threw down a box of stuff. Steve doubted he wanted to know what it was.

"Why else do you think I'd VOLUNTEER to watch him? It talked to everyone else, I want to talk to it too." Erica finished her waffle and Steve struggled to think when the last time he ate was, but he wasn't hungry at all.

The static still buzzed in the back of his head, and he fought shivers.

Old man. He was a useless old Paper Knight. He was a bad joke. A joke that was TIED to a BED. He bet they didn't even use the right knots.

He was really fucked up.

Maybe *permanently*.

"Steve's life ISN'T a GAME. None of this IS!" Dustin fired back grabbing a huge container of...salt?

The static got louder.

"Yeah, I KNOW. I was dragged here and got some weird power and I want to know why! Being *special* isn't *good*!" Erica screeched back as Dustin got out a huge book. God could they just...Oh god was he wrapped into babysitting AGAIN?

How did this happen in the UPSIDE DOWN?

"Can it, Both of you. What is going on? What's with the salt and the book?" Steve lost his temper, but his voice was barely a hoarse murmur. A frigid violent shiver sparked up his spine and he convulsed.

"We have to break you two apart. Before you're 'not OK'." El said simply. Dead. El meant dead.

"Mrs. Sinclair says you have hypothermia, and it's not getting any better. It's gonna kill you if we don't separate your mind, from the Mind Player." Dustin said as he handed the book to Erica.

Holy Bible.

Holy FUCK.

"Are you....are you performing an EXORCISM on me? Do you even know what you're doing?!" Steve practically yelped in shock. Christ how did he become so lame? He was like, every chick in every horror movie.

Pause.

"I've seen the Exorcist." Erica replied. Steve saw that movie too. The exorcism didn't WORK. Didn't one of the priests fling themselves out a window? The other had a heart attack or something?

"And I know white magic spells." Dustin chimed in. White magic spells, like from the Dungeons and Dragons game?

"No. This is a bad idea, where is Hop and your mom?" He purposely wanted to avoid the topic of Billy. He just felt...super awkward. Anxious.

'You're nothing but a burden to them. That's why you feel anxious. You don't want them to acknowledge this is a waste of time and effort.' The Mind Flayer was back. Steve tried to block out his thoughts.

'No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.' His mom said that, and Steve thought it was a famous quote, but didn't know who said it.

"They're fine Steve, but we can't te-" Dustin got cut off.

"What is going on in here? Oh, Steven you're awake. How are you feeling?" Mrs. Sinclair was wearing different clothes, jeans and a long sleeved button up shirt.

Wait, they were all wearing different clothes. Was he?!

If there was a god, he prayed they didn't change his clothes when he was *unconscious*.

"I'm fine." Steve didn't really know what else to say. He couldn't exactly tell them that he felt like he was slowly going INSANE.

Mrs. Sinclair gave him THAT look that Nancy would give when she smelled bullshit.

"Either the Poltergeist or Steve that thinks the exorcism is a bad idea, mama. Even though the Exorcism is *Billy's* idea." Erica explained and Steve didn't know if he liked the way she emphasized Billy's name.

"Why would it matter if it was Billy's idea or not?!" Dustin exclaimed, as if offended.

"Boys are *SLOW*." Erica looked to El and she nodded.

If this was *his* idea where *was* Billy? Was he really *THAT* mad at him to be avoiding him? Usually if he was mad he would just pound his face in. Not that he wanted that, or could even *defend* himself, but he'd rather have him here spewing some colorful curses at him than just....*gone*.

Despite the room full of people, and Dustin, Steve loneliness inexplicably settled in his bones and ice water trickled through his chest.

"Erica, we talked about this. And Steven...we are going to get that Devil out of you. I've bowed my head in church too many times to let the Lord ignore my prayer now." It was then Steve noticed that Mrs. Sinclair had a bowl of steaming something in her hand.

Steve could smell it from here. Chili.

"First, though, you're going to eat something while the Devil is busy." Oh god was she going to FEED him? Please say no.

"I'm not going to let you feed me, Mrs. Sinclair. I have some dignity left, believe it or not." Steve coughed a bit, struggling with his left arm. Was this irony they actually made chili when all he felt was a blizzard all around him?

"I can feed you, Steve." Dustin lifted his head from where he was pouring salt all around.

"NO. Dustin, thanks buddy, but that's worse." Steve moaned. He liked Dustin. Really but, NO.

"OK, I guess we can let one hand go. El can always clamp down one. Right El?" Dustin asked and El nodded. Dustin moved to his left hand,

and began to untie his left hand. They should have used a Round Turn and Two Half-Hitches knot.

His left arm still itched.

As he sort of propped himself up and spooned himself some chili. It wasn't half bad. Was there SPAM in it?

Billy made this.

Dustin started to sprinkle salt all around and it was then Steve realized he had to address the elephant in the room. It didn't make sense that the Mind Flayer was now so quiet and he woke up.

"...Where's Hop and Billy?" He managed in between bites. The chili wasn't half bad, needed more spice.

"They're distracting the Mind Flayer so we can do the Exorcism while it's preoccupied. That was MY idea." Dustin said Steve's eyes shot wide.

NO.

"Distract?! No! What?!" That was INSANE. It wasn't worth it. He wasn't *worth* it.

"Yeah, we gotta move it because even though Billy is like a warlock and Hopper is a ranger, they would probably have to roll pretty high on a d20 to-"

"Dustin, dear, I think that's enough salt and enough d-20 business as well." Mrs. Sinclair interrupted Dustin but the damage had been done. Why were Billy and Hop out there risking their necks without Erica and her flashlight and El and her mind powers? It sounded like suicide. All this just for HIM?

"They shouldn't have gone. Why did they go? Why did you let them?!" Steve lost all his appetite. He might throw up. What if they didn't come back? What if him being weak caused them to...

Useless Paper Knight.

No.

"We're a team, Steve. Super friends." El said, smiling slightly. Like the super heroes?

He felt super alright, super *terrible*.

"Alright, we have the salt, the bible, the cross, Erica, it's time to shine ok, sweetie?!" Mrs. Sinclair announced and El picked up a wooden cross that she must have had on the floor. Erica scrambled up next to him. She was wearing a white dress now that he noticed. She put her hands on either side of his head.

Her dark eyes were locked on his.

"Don't worry, He-Man always comes back." Erica whispered in his ear.

Billy's laugh echoed in his head, leaning back on the hood of that Buick. Smiling. That hip swerve. If he didn't come back...

If the last real thing he said to him was that he was a *faggot* he couldn't live with that.

"Let's get one thing straight, you delusional, puta madre. One way or another, I'm taking you out. I told you, your fight is with me. I'm going to BREAK YOU." The thing was when he broke things, Billy usually broke too.

Steve looked all around. El was at the foot of the bed with the cross, Dustin was next to her with a candle of all things, and Mrs Sinclair had the bible behind Erica. All the sudden he had the feeling that this was moving too fast...but...

Chills rippled up and down his spine. His teeth chattered and the static increased.

Did that mean Billy and Hop were *losing*?

"It's coming back. Start!" Steve hissed.

White light began to glow near his temples and Dustin lit the candle.

"And as he was yet a coming, the devil threw him down, and tare him. And Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the child, and delivered him again to his father. And John answered and said, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name; and we forbad him, because he followeth not with us." Mrs. Sinclair began reading the Bible and Steve wished he paid more attention in church.

"Relax, Steve this is fool proof." Dustin said and El shushed him.

The temperature plummeted, his body spasmed.

YszzzhdfStevehshhZshhd

Steve hissed and the light around his temples increased.

"Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you." Mrs. Sinclair continued and Steve gritted his teeth to keep them from chattering.

STEVEyssshhhzzzznoooooo

"So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them." Mrs. Sinclair continued but her voice was getting drowned out by the static. Steve was vaguely aware shadows were spreading on the ceiling.

"The Master is leaving Steve!" El warned and the candle that Dustin was holding blazed into a flare.

"Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand!" Mrs. Sinclair finished and closed the book and the light around his head now blinded him. He squinted his eyes shut but even from behind his eyelids he knew that lights were flashing in the room.

"You can have him, but it's too late!" Steve shouted and body bucked off the bed, back arced high in the air. A final wisp of shadow left his mouth, disintegrating from Erica's light and Dustin's candle.

The static in his mind stopped all together into silence. Steve smiled

in relief.

IT ACTUALLY WORKED!

"The Master knows where we are!" El exclaimed. Steve took a few deep breaths. His arm still itched, but he had his mind back, that's what really mattered.

"I'm gonna signal them back!" Erica yelled and ran with her flashlight. The light dimmed and ice suddenly clamped over Steve's body. His mind had cleared, but why was he still so cold?! Why did he still feel so *weak*?

A familiar, piercing shriek echoed down the hallway.

The Alien.

"Dustin! Stay back!" Mrs. Sinclair commanded, grabbing the shotgun aiming at the doorway and the room was deafened by a shotgun blast.

"MOMMA!" An explosion of wood and wall flew into the room and instantly the room lit up bright as a lighthouse. From Steve's angle, he couldn't see much but he prayed. Please, let me not be useless.

I'm *not* a Paper Knight.

Something warm in the center of his chest embered low and Steve swallowed, his body had long ago stopped shivering, blizzard frigid. But he looked at his arm, the scales, the claws.

He tore through the rope on his right arm and flung off the blankets. He ripped through the ropes on his legs and flung himself out of the bed onto the floor, hitting it with a thud and staggering to a stand.

Ok, new jacket and shirt, same pants. They didn't completely undress him.

The Alien hissed from the hallway as Mrs. Sinclair reloaded. Erica was blinding a Demodog with one hand, hammer in another. Where did *that* come from?! El had her hand out at the horrifying Alien, keeping it from entering the room.

Dustin had a tranq and....a fire place poker.

Steve gritted his teeth and sluggishly lunged forward towards the Alien. He couldn't be scared here. He was the knight.

He had to be man of the house.

"Round two, this time I got you." Steve pumped himself up, trying to ignore the sensation that it felt like he was wading through a snowbank.

'Plant your feet, Harrington.' He did and jacked back and slashed at the Alien's throat. That green, acidic blood spewed out, but it didn't burn through his scales. If El could hold on to it, maybe he had a chance to kill it.

An icicle of chill spiked through his spine and Steve tried to push it out of his mind. He continued to hack and slash at any part of the Alien he could while El held it fast. He had to do more damage!

Where was his bat?! He dodged a whip of the Alien's tail that broke through El's mind control.

"Ahhhh!" Dustin hurtled by him, towards the Alien and jammed the tranq into its neck. YES!

"Move!" Mrs. Sinclair yanked Dustin back by the hood on his new hoodie into the bedroom, dropping the fireplace poker.

Shotgun blast. Shotgun blast.

The Alien screeched and green splattered against the walls, but still stood. Steve had ENOUGH. The ember on his chest warmed up hotter and the flaps of scaled formed all the way down to his knees.

Maybe with this armor down to his knees, he could move faster.

He lurched up and charged, grabbing the poker and faster than any sprint in basketball, charged at the Alien. Steve threw all his weight into the poker as he shoved it through the gap in the Alien's chest armor. Green blood spat out of the wound as Steve gritted his teeth and pushed harder. The corroding end of the poker plunged straight

through this chest.

The Alien screeched and bit down savagely on Steve's shoulder.

Steve winced, preparing for searing pain, but the teeth hardly went through the scales.

"Gotta try harder than that." Steve gritted out and slashed at his throat with his new, hooked claws. Green blood spurted everywhere as Steve tore at anything he could. Muscle, tendons, anything. Had to kill it, he had to PROVE himself.

"Cujos!" Erica warned as three Demodogs crashed through the bedroom window. El threw one back out. Mrs. Sinclair opened fire on the others, extra shells in hand.

The Alien reared back and backhanded him back against the wall. Hard.

Steve saw stars as the Alien knocked him to the ground and then kicked him down the hall where he crashed back first into the wall.

"*That*, was hard." Steve coughed, the cold gripped his lungs. Then he saw it, his nailbat propped up against the wall. Just a few feet....

Steve groaned, moving his battered body and grabbed his trusty bat. He had to move quick.

The alien screeched and vaulted towards him just like in the damn movie. But he wasn't powerless, and weirdly not scared, maybe it was the adrenaline. He had a job to do. He sprung up and arced the bat back.

"TAKE THIS!" The force of the swing made a bone tingling wooshing sound through the air. The nail bat collided with the side of the Alien's head. Steve inwardly cheered: a sick, sticky thuck followed by a hissing gurgle filled the hall as he wrenched the bat out and swung again.

The Alien's dented head cracked open and caved in on the third strike, but the bat was done. The corrosive acid blood had eaten clean through it.

Thanks for the memories nailbat.

Whew. Ok now t—

The room spun around him, and Steve dropped the bat and fell to the floor. Freezing. Too cold. Maybe he over did it. Steve tried to move his legs, but he couldn't really feel them. Numb. He tried to rub feeling back into his legs, but now his left arm twitched and jolted from an itching pain from underneath the scales.

His teeth chattered. Why was he still so COLD?

Get it together, he still had a job to do. The Demodogs still hunted them. He started to feebly army crawl, his claws turning back into chipped fingernails. No, no, not now! The scales retreated back down off his hands and under his shirt and new jacket.

A wave of fatigue and arctic tundra air swept over him. He willed himself to keep moving back down the hall.

Shotgun blasts.

"Watch out!" Dustin yelled. Time froze. Steve struggled to move faster, but his legs were deadweight and his left arm spasmed uselessly. Still, he had to keep moving.

Steve's vision tunneled as he struggled back to the bedroom window. He arrived just in time to be a useless witness.

Another Demodog leapt through the open window. Steve watched it all in slow motion.

Mrs. Sinclair's back was to the window, firing at a Demodog in front of her.

El was pinning another Demodog to the floor.

Dustin was far enough away, holding a table leg.

But Erica.

Erica was right in its path, blistering the other Demodog in the

corner.

"Erica!" Dustin dropped the table leg and pushed Erica out of the way.

The Demodog tackled Dustin to the ground and a bite came next.

"NO!" El flung it off Dustin. Too late.

"Dustin!" Mrs. Sinclair pivoted and shot the Demodog twice.

Too little.

A blaze of dancing fire erupted from the window into the room, filling it.

Billy!

Pop pop pap pap pop pap pop.

Hop.

A shock of snow swept through Steve's bloodstream and his limbs stilled under a glacier of ice. His scales had long ago folded back into his clammy skin. His vision blurred a bit at the edges as Billy vaulted through the window.

Frigid. Freezing cold. Frozen.

Dancing flames surrounded him, but they didn't warm him at all.

He couldn't feel his legs, or his fingers...but DUSTIN! Steve saw his own ragged shallow breath as he tilted his head up to see Dustin and so much *red*. Mrs. Sinclair was holding him in her lap, head lolled back.

No. please...he remembered looking for Dart, his pet Demodog. Their walk on the train tracks. Talking about girls. His amazing Farrah Fawcett hair for that dumb dance. Setting those damn tunnels on fire.

Dustin came to the Upside-Down for *him*. He ROLLED for it. He couldn't die here...he was just a *kid*. He was so smart too. The

smartest of those geeks. He didn't deserve this.

"Dustin. No. Dus—Dustin." Steve whispered out, body seizing as burning, scorching arms wrapped around his back and knees, lifting him up. His whole body scorched wherever Billy touched him.

He looked up at Billy, he had bruises forming next to his eye and scratches down his neck but looked ok.

"I killed him. I killed Dustin." Billy looked down at him, blue eyes blazing wild.

"Hell NO you didn't, don't be stupid. Steve, he'll be alright. Fuck, you're like touching ice." His voice buzzed warm in his ear. Billy held him sorta bridal style, but Steve didn't *care*....he just looked at Dustin.

His eyes were shut and there was so much blood on his chest, and it looked shredded open. So much blood. Billy was just being NICE there was NO WAY.

They weren't in the hospital anymore, what could they...

Erica's hands lit up white on his chest, showing the extent of the damage. Steve could see ribs.

"Billy, it's not working!" Erica cried out. Tears in her eyes.

"Erica. I think you gotta SING." Billy's chest reverberated. "Sing that Haitian Vodou Papillion song." What? What was Billy talking about? Wait.

'Voodoo Priest sang me a song about butterflies and used rainbow magic to heal me. One left.' Billy wasn't lying during their game.

"Papaloko ou sé van." Erica sang and the light shifted from white to a prised rainbow. "Pousé-n alé. Nou sé papiyon." Steve's eyes bulged out of his head as the wound began to close up, skin knitting itself together. He couldn't see any more bones. "Na pote nouvèl bay agoué." Erica finished and the room was so silent you could hear a pin drop.

Dustin's chest rose and fell and he coughed.

"You're an angel. My baby's an angel." Mrs. Sinclair rubbed the tears off her face and Steve heard the heavy footfall of boots from the front of the hallway. Had to be Hop.

"No, I'm a Vodou Priestess. Just like Uncle Josue was." Erica yawned sleepily.

"You weren't joking about the voodoo." Steve whispered. Didn't Billy also mention voodoo at the quarry?

"I was being straight with you. Have been since I got here." Billy replied.

"You're a fifth level Bard at LEAST. You just used Mass Cure Wounds. You could join our campaign." Dustin patted himself down, poking his belly where the bite was. He stood up and jumped then kicked the dead Demodog.

"Uh, pass, *Nerd*. I'm a Girl Scout and to serve God, my country, and to help people at all times' is the Girl Scout motto. And you saved me, so I—" Erica's eyelids grew heavy. "Owed you one, as a Girl Scout." Erica yawned heavy.

"...Thanks...guess you aren't so annoying." Dustin muttered.

"You too." Erica murmured and sat down on the floor, out of Steve's view.

"Why is he like this? Didn't the exorcism work? Why is he still FREEZING? Why can't he move?" Billy sounded angry.

Mrs. Sinclair maneuvered over to Steve and placed her two fingers at his neck

"Lord Jesus, you denied one miracle but granted another. His hypothermia...it's getting worse its now in the severe range. His pulse his weak, and his skin is turning blue, his fingers look almost frostbitten. I'd put his temperature at around 86 degrees." Mrs. Sinclair sighed heavy.

Steve was pretty sure the normal body temperature was 98 degrees and that difference didn't sound promising.

"It didn't work. The salt, the candle. The wooden 't'. The heavy book and the words. The Master is gone, but Steve is not Ok." El murmured and Billy walked towards the bed and Steve felt like such a literal BURDEN now.

"Billy! Use your fire!" Dustin suggested.

"I already tried my fire on him before. It didn't work, *remember?* Everyone just, GO, give me a minute to *think*." They should all just leave him here. Let the Mind Flayer have him. He wasn't worth *this*.

"Dustin." Hop called out and Dustin immediately whipped his head around. "Come with me, it's....about time I taught you how to shoot. I got a smaller rifle for you, one that you should be able to handle." Hop gestured to the door and Dustin whipped his head back and forth between Hop and Steve.

"Really?! A real gun?!" Dustin's face lit up.

"It wasn't my IDEA, but YES. Let's go." Hop said rubbing his face, giving Billy a *look*.

"I'll be right back Steve. I think I gotta change my class to Ranger." Dustin chased after Hop.

Billy placed him back on the bed, and Steve could barely move his head, he couldn't feel either of his arms now. Even that horrible blood itch left his left arm. Billy threw the blankets back over him but he couldn't feel the pressure of them.

"I'm gonna put Erica in the other room to rest." Mrs. Sinclair announced and El followed her out, eyes curious.

He heard something slide down the wall next to him and he turned his head to see Billy leaning up against the wall in slumped half squat.

"You know what I said back at the hospital wasn't me, sorry anyway. I should have... I" Billy cut him off.

"Putain. Fuck. don't apologize like a girl, Steve. I *know*. I should have figured it out sooner. Je suis Desole..., *I'm* sorry." Billy whispered and Steve's mouth was too dry at first to say anything. He just saw Billy's profile, but he looked deflated. He had on a different shirt, blue with blood splatters and rips all down it.

Billy never apologized for anything.

"The exorcism should have worked. It's a DEMON. A fucking DEMON should be weak against an exorcism. It makes SENSE. You should be CURED." Billy sounded choked up and Steve *hated* it. It wasn't *his* fault. Billy shouldn't be agonizing over how weak Steve 'Paper Knight' Harrington was.

"Kinda worked...leave me behind, I'm spent." Steve wheezed out and Billy twisted around so quick he was a blur.

"No. You don't get to GIVE UP." Billy's blue eyes burned into him and Steve quirked a small smile. Didn't Billy get he was already sort of dead anyway?

"Dustin almost dying only happened because you all split up. I'm slowing you all down. Go after it together. You don't *need* me." Steve resigned himself. What else could they do? They tried the exorcism, it didn't work. They did their best.

"Don't you pull this shit on me. You were KING Steve not two minutes ago. You turned Alien into a crabcake." Billy was in his face, pounding the side of his fist into the wallpaper. His blue eyes flashed bright, and his mouth was a tight grimace.

"Not without help, and I can't make the scales happen again. No shining knight here, just a paper one. I'm *done*, Billy." Steve had a hard time getting his breath.

"Bullshit. I call fucking *bullshit*. You held them off till we got back. You can fight this. You're not dying in this shithole." Billy insisted tonguing out his bottom lip.

Maybe if he told him about what happened after Davie, Billy would get what he was trying to say.

"I can tie a better noose than Neil." Steve rasped out.

"What the *fuck* does that have to do with *anything*?" Billy's voice pitched high.

"I got kicked out of boarding school at thirteen. Ask Hop why. The night before my parents came to get me, I got some rope, looped it over the pipe of the fire sprinkler of my boarding room. Then looped it around my neck. Kicked out the chair. Then the pipe broke loose and the water burst out. Rust colored. I should have died then." Steve licked his lips, but his tongue was dry. He could still sometimes feel that rope around his neck, and the taught feeling for the slightest of moments before he fell to the oriental carpet.

He told his parents he hit the pipe with a football, but they didn't really believe him. The amount in damages his parents had to pay the school....

"I'm not asking that Sheriff *shit*. I can't believe YOU." Steve darted his eyes towards Billy and he had never seen him this angry. "So that's how the great King Steve thinks? You're living on *borrowed time*?! You're going to let the Bulgasari WIN because you hit ROCK BOTTOM once? You're gonna give up on YOU?" Billy got right in his face and Steve didn't know why, but he almost felt frightened.

"I watched my maman hit rock bottom over and over, and EACH TIME she got back up. Even when ignorant know-it-alls told her she'd be nothing but a *junkie mulatto whore*, she proved them ALL WRONG. And even if she isn't here anymore, it's not because she gave up. The smack was laced, or else she would have come back for breakfast." Billy's eyes blazed and he clenched his fists till his knuckles blanched

He slammed the meat of his fist into the wall.

Billy's mother was half-black and died from drugs. Hop was right. Steve almost killed Billy the *same* way his own *mother* died

"When they found Antoine's body, Jerry told us he had defensive wounds on his hands. HE FOUGHT BACK. So, why WON'T YOU?!" Billy kicked the wall punctured the drywall. Antoine was killed too?

"It's not worth i—" Billy kicked the wall.

"YOU DON'T GET TO TELL ME WHAT I VALUE." Billy seethed. Steve was considerably confused. "I thought you were the only person of VALUE in this shit hole town of Hawkins. YOU were the ONLY one I WANTED. I'm *fucked* in the head, and I CAN'T do things RIGHT, but I do know what I WANT." Billy had tears in his eyes and Steve's heart rate spiked.

"I *want* to beat the Bulgasari. I want to EAT its heart for trying to *take* you because it's my FAULT. By saving me, using your *aura*, you left yourself open for the Bulgasari to get your soul." Billy's hands were in fists and his voice sounded thick and he squatted down low again so he could see his face, red and his eyes hard and blue.

Steve was stunned into silence. He didn't think he SAVED Billy at all.

"But, if THIS is REALLY you. If you're just going to...roll over and give up like some little bitch. NOT HOLD YOUR GROUND and let YOURSELF down...I don't want anyone like THAT." Billy scowled and stood up.

No. Don't leave. *Stay*.

"Yeah, I'm a queer, and I want you. Doesn't that make you feel sick?" Billy's eyes gleamed bright and Steve panicked and an ember sparked to life in him.

"Billy-" Steve coughed up phlegm in a lung-wracking coughing fit.

No. It didn't. *Stay*.

"If *that* makes you sick, then this will REALLY get you going. If you're giving up, maybe I'll chase the *other* guy who saved me, Jonathan. Yeah, I'll fag it up with him. *Disgusting*, right?" Billy did NOT just say his *first* name. He only called people that he LIKED. Billy didn't like Jonathan; he thought he was a voyeur and *weirdo*.

"Billy, Stop! What are you even talking about?!" Steve whispered, and Billy appeared over him, blond hair curling around him.

"I'm talking about...how now that I think about it, Jonathan isn't so

bad on the eyes, and he does listen." That was a low blow. Steve had improved on that. "Oh, you don't want me to steal him from Wheeler and break her shallow heart? TOO BAD. I'll crown him with my necklace, strip him down til he's only wearing that too. He'll flip fairy. Then Jonathan will groan my name when I let *him* FUCK me boneless in my Camaro." Billy sounded serious and leaned back to leave. A furious fire erupted in Steve's chest. Despite trying his hardest not to, the vision of Billy choosing Jonathan over him...of Jonathan in Billy's steamy z28 with Billy in his lap...

NO. JUST NO.

Steve reached up with renewed strength, shoved back the blankets, grabbed the collar of Billy's shirt and pulled his mouth to his. Steve didn't care how his frozen, chapped lips probably scratched Billy's soft ones. He had a POINT to make. He didn't care if their teeth clacked for the slightest of moments before Steve slipped his tongue into his mouth. He had to shove the idea of him getting with Jonathan ASIDE.

He kneaded his lips against his and a scalding hot hand was placed on his cheek and ran down to the back of his neck and head. Fingers laced through his hair.

Steve felt ALIVE even if the cold lingered in his body. He knew Billy wanted HIM, and Billy had to know he wanted *him* BACK.

They broke apart, Steve glared at Billy heatedly.

Billy's too blue eyes had glazed over in shock. His lips mouthed something inaudible that Steve didn't catch.

"You and I *both* know, if anyone in Hawkins is going to fuck you in your Z28, It's ME." Steve didn't even recognize his own voice. He didn't even know where this confidence came from. But it was *true*. He *wanted* that to happen. He *wanted* him. Jesus he wanted Billy, BAD.

Billy finally blinked, eyes focusing, mouth closing.

"That's only going to happen if we beat the Bulgasari. Are you with

me, King Steve?" Billy smirked bright, regaining himself.

"Yeah, Yeah I am. Wait, did you say all that JUST to manipulate me?" Steve asked, fearing maybe, maybe Billy was just messing with him.

Billy crashed down back on him, mouth hungry on Steve's, and hot hands roving down his shoulders and chest. No, *not* a mind game. Billy really WANTED him. Steve eased back, letting Billy in, opening himself up as his tongue darted in his mouth.

Then, arctic ice gripped his lungs and Steve gasped sharply through the kiss. Billy leaned back biting his swollen lip.

"I'm going to guess that was your answer." Steve tried at humor, but his words were barely above a whisper.

"Damn straight." Billy looked up, as if trying to remember something. "In LA I have a big family, four older brothers and a younger sister. We are a mixed bag to say the least. Think junk drawer. Javier, the middle brother, Colombian, would know what went wrong. He and his mother are CATHOLIC. DAMNIT." Billy cursed, pounding the mattress. Steve managed to roll onto his side, still under the blankets.

Javier, the massive muscle-head wearing the cross necklace in the photo, knew about exorcisms?

"This isn't ALL on you..." Steve offered lamely but Billy drummed his fingers on Steve's upper arm.

"If only Javier were here, or I could TALK to him. That weird girl, Jane, can't find him like she did me and Erica. She said she needs a damn PICTURE to find Javier. Like I have a *photo* of him! I didn't bring ANY of that shit to Hawkins, I left all that back in South Central for safe keeping..." Billy cursed and Steve's eyes widened.

The photo in his pocket. It didn't have Javier in it, but it had Sang Hoon and the other brother. Bayani.

It might destroy any trust between them...but...

"Billy. My left jeans pocket. Check it." Steve whispered out. "It might help."

A lava hot hand slipped down his back jeans pocket and grabbed the worn, folded paper. Also grabbed his ass, but Steve half expected that.

Steve held his breath as Billy opened it.

Maybe Billy would change his mind. Maybe Billy would hate him over this.

"You....how?....You don't...There's only two people on this *planet* who know where this photo is." Billy stuttered; eyes wide as he sat up higher on the bed.

"We needed a photo to find you...Ms. Mayfield didn't have one. Max told us you might have a record so we called the police, but they just gave us a phone number. Detective Xi. We, well mostly I, talked to Mei and Sang Hoon, your sister and one of your brothers. Max told us some about your family. They mostly mocked me." Steve chuckled a little, but Billy didn't react at all. Stuck in shock.

Steve's throat dried out.

"Sang Hoon faxed us three photos. Only I know about that one. I... kept it. I don't know why, I just thought this one was private." Steve waited for Billy to leave him. He deserved it. He had hid this from him the whole time. Ice spiked into his chest again and Steve sharply inhaled and collapsed back down onto the bed, convulsing.

"...going fucking to kill Sang Hoon Cho. This was NOT what I meant by safe keeping. We'll talk about this later, Steve." He said his *first* name, at least. Steve gasped as the weight of the bed shifted and Billy left, striding out of the room. Steve closed his eyes, the chill crept back up his body, numbing his limbs.

"Find *him*. He's not Javier, but he can help." Steve must have nodded off, when he looked over and saw El, Hop and Dustin next to the bed with Billy pointing at someone in the photo.

The one with the smile and the braid. Bayani.

"He's going to be hard to find, he's been running from...*people* his whole life. But he is trying to find me, so that will help us, and he's

our best bet to save Steve." Billy gave the paper to El. El studied it and so did Hop behind him. Hop's vision sharpened, as if he realized something.

"Running from the *law*? He looks crazier than YOU. What is even happening in his photo?" Dustin asked.

"Not crazy. Different." El corrected automatically.

Billy shifted uneasily.

"None of your business on all counts."

"Billy, I'm not going to let Jane expose herself Mind Flayer on this little info, and we are running out of time. Level with us, who is this guy?" Hop took the photo.

All of you are sworn to *secrecy*. Especially you, Sheriff Sharpshooter, don't blab this to other *pigs*. He's my FAMILY, got it?" Did Billy just *compliment* Hop?

"I think you can trust us by now, Billy." Something definitely happened between Hop and Billy while he was passed out.

"He's my eldest brother and he runs from *scientists*. He has powers too, but they're...unpredictable. He gets random visions, sees auras, and hears voices. With them he can see the future, *sorta*, and find anything, like those three dickheads even without a photo. Given *time*, he can probably find us here in Alice's acid trip wonderland, but like you said, we don't HAVE time so you gotta TRUST ME BACK." Billy gritted out and Steve's mouth was too dry. Billy didn't seem like the type to tell much about his family.

And he was doing it for him, despite hiding all they knew.

"You just made him sound MORE crazy, Like schizophrenia crazy, I studied that too. But if his visions can help, I don't care. I'm coming with." Dustin was furiously scribbling something down in his notebook.

Billy scoffed and said something in a different language. Not French and it didn't sound *nice*.

"He's like sister, but a mirror. She makes others see things, he sees others. His name?" El looked damn near excited about this.

"Bayani Anagolay Lakapati. He's Filipino and judging from you, he is probably NOTHING like your sister." Billy always looked so sure... and better in those jeans than those scrubs

El raised a challenging eyebrow and smiled.

"I'm...not going to like him too much, am I?" Hop sighed and Billy flashed his teeth.

"He taught me basically all I know, so NO, probably *not*. But I don't really give a FUCK if he gets your jollies off, this isn't some *blind date*. This is to cure Steve's hypothermia, and stick it to the Bulgasari." Billy scathed, walking back to the bed and put his hand on Steve's shoulder. It warmed him some but he couldn't find his voice to say so.

Steve had to focus hard to keep his eyelids open. He wanted to fight, he *did*. He didn't want to let them down...let *himself* down.

"You got a real way with words, kid. Jane, let's give this a shot." Hop sighed as Billy squeezed Steve's shoulder.

"Thanks." Steve mumbled, fighting off fatigue.

"Thank Baya when you meet him. Something tells me he won't be in a good mood, and I'll have to '*talk him down*'." Billy tongued out his bottom lip, 'air quoting' the 'talk him down'. "I also haven't seen him in person since Antoine's funeral, sooo..." Billy wrinkled his nose. Oh. Now he got it...

"He's gonna kick your ass, isn't he?" Steve chuckled dryly and Billy's smile was slight, but warm.

"Yeah, and he doesn't skimp on the footwear either." Billy scoffed and Steve felt oddly comforted. Bayani didn't sound half bad.

Maybe they could even shoot the shit if they got through this. When. When they got through this.

Notes:

Hello! I've been sick and had some extra time on my hands so I managed to update in record time!

So this chapter took me by surprise. I didn't think it would turn out like this, but here it is! I wanted to add in the whole encounter with Bayani, but this chapter was already getting too long and I wanted it from Billy's perspective anyway.

They kissed muahahahaha! :) It came a bit sooner than I originally thought I wanted, but overall I think it was good timing.

I like the irony of Steve not wanting Billy to give up, but that's exactly what he is doing here.

Steve's backstory is a little rushed, but overall I am ok with it. His past sort of came out all in one go due to stress and guilt after almost killing another guy he liked. His backstory, on purpose, is supposed to be less intricate than Billy's, but I wanted some meat to it.

I perhaps didn't bread crumb it enough in the earlier chapters, so i am still working on fleshing it out. I wanted his backstory to have a little more depth to it than just him at the boarding school, and i feel this fits with his overall character. He sort of keeps people at arms length, plays around because he was afraid of falling for someone else again and getting hurt/getting himself hurt. He also just likes to downplay everything, and pretend nothing really happened. That the past Steve died, and he reinvented himself, but really that's not what happened.

He also has a feeling that he is coasting, that everyday after his attempt he is just sort of now 'too cool'.

Also, the leave before you're left. He doesn't think Davie left him, but that was a driving force behind his motives. He's always ready to move onto something else, at least until Nancy, and to an extent Dustin came along.

Steve is a pretty complex character, he knows when he is being manipulated, but falls for it sometimes anyway. We see it in the

show. He also is a bit possessive/jealous which comes out here a bit, but I feel this doesn't come from a bad place, it was very much instinctual. That and he also has some unresolved issues with Nancy leaving him for Jonathan (leave before you're left) and has a bit of an ego, thinking he is better suited for Billy than Jonathan. That's not nice, but Steve isn't a perfect character.

Also, the behind the scenes bonding between Billy and Hop will be revealed later. They 'broed' out.

I did my best to research hypothermia, and sailing, but if you see any inconsistencies please feel free to let me know!

I am trying my best to bring Dustin and El more into the lime light and letting their personalities shine a little more. They will bond a bit with Billy in this next chapter and Dustin will have more importance.

Bayani's name means Warrior in Tagalog/filipino. His other two names are named after goddesses in filipino legends/mythology. Anagolay is the daughter of Lakapati and is the goddess of finding lost things. Lakapati is a transgender goddess/god and is said to be the most kind and caring of goddesses.

Next chapter is going to be Bayani meets some of the crew. I'm keeping it a surprise as to what happens.

thanks, and please comment if you have time! Each one really inspires me :)

8. A Forgotten Blade

The Paper Knight and The Killing Tree

Chapter Eight: A Forgotten Blade

"Meeting him couldn't possibly be...more...awk...than..." Billy, half sitting on the bed, leaned off to see that Steve had passed out again. Every urge in him, every tendon in his fingers wanted him to do some dumb girl shit like brush the sweaty hair off his clammy, pinched forehead.

He just barely resisted.

Never in his sauciest wet dreams would Billy have thought Steve Harrington would *kiss* him, much less kiss him SOBER. Billy didn't even intentionally mean to egg him on! He was baiting Steve into slapping him again, not a hot tonguing. Steve always steeled up and got live-wire charged whenever he bagged on Wheeler. But Billy had to insure his insults were a slam dunk because Steve could also be pretty fucking dense when it suited him. So he had pour the fag on thick, sticky, and sweet.

Just how *graphic* did his deep-throat gay details have to go for Steve belt him black and blue?

His idea, Byers level of graphic. Easy play. High key pouring salt into the raw wound that someone else wanted to gloss that FREAK'S cherry over King Steve's would WORK STEVE OUT.

Especially if it was a guy.

Of course, he'd rather stick his dick in Susan than Jonathan Byers. HA, boy wouldn't THAT be *fucked up*.

Steve was supposed to be DISGUSTED that Billy read even a *little* into the Bulgasari's flirting. He was supposed to crack him across the jaw that he'd dare even THINK Steve would bat for team queer. Billy would risk Steve HATING everything he was, spitting on him in the hall, throwing 'bows in basketball, getting people to exile him in

Hawkins as a Faggot if it meant Steve would PUT UP and not GIVE UP.

He got fire alright, but Steve didn't fucking burn him, he burned FOR him.

Steve flamed full tilt JEALOUS.

King Steve *jealous* over Byers for a flip-out fairy like himself. They really were stuck in a parallel universe.

On paper, Billy had initiated and been surprised by much better kisses. Steve's attempt was all chapped lips, left-over chili, and ice. But Billy would take a kiss like that over anyone Hawkins...No. Simply *anyone* had to offer him.

That kiss caused him to forget every language in his head, it caught him off-guard like a good basketball juke.

'You and I both know, if anyone in Hawkins is going to fuck you in your Z28, It's ME.' That ran chills through his ribs. His blood never craved a deep fucking so much in his LIFE. He forgot he was supposed to be miserable. And that wasn't *fair*.

It wasn't fair Steve made him pillow-talk *soft*.

He had to answer that by pressing Steve back down into bed, make him pool and melt. Invading his mouth with his so he'd pant, squirm and cream his designer jeans. Or...maybe Billy wanted Steve to do that *to* him.

But, now Billy looked at Steve shallowly breathing with one foot in his grave. He didn't deserve the Belle of the ball. His beast wasn't going to magically turn into a prince at the end of this squalid, little fairy tale. Steve lay broken and that was because Billy *broke* him.

Happily-ever-after his mixed-race ass.

Billy felt a spooky presence to his right and he jolted as Sideways Girl came up to *owl* at him.

"Can I help you?" He asked, annoyed.

"Max has the other one." Jane passed him a piece of paper.

"Why would I give a rat's ass wha-" Billy opened the paper and, despite knowing better, his heart paused anyway.

His Maman and him.

He *still* missed her, even after all these years. Sang Hoon told him once, drunk off cheap malt liquor, that wasn't weak to miss her. Billy cursed at himself anyway.

"My brother Marcus took this photo, I was wearing his hand-me-down Lakers T. If he was as good at staying out of the way of Johnny Law as he was with a camera, he wouldn't have been locked up." Billy wasn't sure why he said all of that out loud. Maybe there was that look in her eye that begged for more information and he couldn't talk about his Maman right now.

Not after what that Bulgasari showed him.

"I was locked up too, but I didn't *know* it. Papa and the scientists took me from my mama. They kept me in a lab with my sister. I escaped, and so did she." Sideways girl smiled just a little, like Bayani would. He pocketed the paper as everything suddenly made total sense.

This...changed things. Scientists...Those scientists.

Billy's hunch was right about what the Chief said earlier, about this girl not being his own blood. The lab, the scientists...they had to be the same ones that were after Bayani if they caged her.

"Marcus always said, 'La liberté avant tout', liberty above all else. Hope you made those pendejos pay." Billy said it because he had a feeling she wanted some sort of bonding *thing* from him. Why? No fucking clue.

He didn't want a gaggle of snotty kids waddling and quacking after him like Steve did.

"Yes. My sister is getting her revenge too. What about Bayani?" She didn't shirk her gaze from him, just smiled a bit and those dark eyes of her glinted. This girl was cracked as an egg on a windshield.

"Bayani? Oh yeah. But if I tell you about that, your dad will shoot me and then that really *would* be a circus." Billy snorted; picturing the scene he'd create if he told her about how Bayani cut off two fingers off a scientist while dressed up as Cyndi Lauper.

Then creepy girl held out her wrist. He caught the ink easily enough. 11. Now, most idiots in Hawkins might think it was a tattoo, but Billy knew a brand when he saw one.

A brand meant you belonged to someone. The scientists thought she belonged to them. *Property*.

"Does Bayani, have one too? My sister has an 8." She asked timidly.

"Bayani has had ink covering all of his chest, arms, wrists, and hands since I can remember. You can ask him when you see him." Billy hadn't even considered that Bayani's traditional Filipino tats were a cover up.

"... Bitchin." Oh MIERDA He just gave her an ANNOYING idea.

"Jenjang (shit)...you're too young for a tattoo. Just cover it up with more of Erica's friendship bracelets and your bad makeup for now." Billy sighed. The last thing he needed was the Chief chewing his ear off because Sideways got Hep-C from some back alley 'stick-and-poke' shop in Indianapolis.

Sideways girl just picked at her bracelet and walked back out of the room, leaving Billy with a HUGE fucking problem.

Billy Loga was a lot of terrible things, but he wasn't *disloyal* to his family.

Well, not until *now*.

If there was anyone in this fucked up universe he didn't have to worry about, it would be Bayani Anagolay Lakapati. Baya could handle himself, and had been for thirty-one years. If he were here, he'd have that Bulgasari's balls under his teal stilettos.

No one could outmaneuver Bayani...except the scientists who tampered with his brain.

Billy didn't have a damn clue if Baya had seen scientists in Hawkins in a 'mind vision', or if Bayani was just driving in BLIND. Steve talking with Sang Hoon and Mei meant that after the call, Mei had definitely called Baya and told him about *everything*.

Of course, the two parts of his life he was desperately trying to keep separate managed to collide like a train wreck. Billy wasn't sure if he could ever explain that part of his life to Steve, or if he'd even get the chance.

NO. Steve promised he wouldn't give up. So Billy wouldn't give up on him either. He caught that spark in Steve's eyes, the spark that tore his heart open and made it bleed messy.

Billy, admittedly, had no fucking clue if Bayani could actually *help* Steve, but it was a solid bet. Baya could remember anything he saw, even a recipe for dimsum he had read eleven years ago, and was cool as ICE under pressure. He may not be an exorcisms expert, like Javier, but he always just came through in the clutch.

Kinda like Mei, who loved that dimsum recipe.

Jesus, he couldn't believe Mei and Steve had an *actual* conversation. Steve and Hoonie having a conversation? That held water. Weirdly enough they'd probably hit it off because Hoonie was a total doofus who had the WORST sense of humor.

Billy would have sworn he was blue in the face that Mei would claw Steve open and eat him alive just like that Cujo did to Neil. Speaking of that, Billy didn't even know if Baya saw Neil try to kill him, Neil get his throat ripped out, anything in this Hellscape, or WHAT.

Kantot (fuck)!

But what he *did* know, was that Baya on a 'Vision Quest' kicked up some *serious* dust. Baya would do more than just rattle a few cages. He would break into houses, beat people up, kidnap, stalk... basically stop at *nothing* till he found what (or in this case *who*) he was searching for.

Billy had left LA without a single 'adios amigos' to anyone in his

family to keep them *safe* from Neil. He cut himself off from Bayani by never calling out for him, or even thinking about him. Every time Billy felt Bayani search for him, an itchy tingle in the back of his skull, he drank in the dark until it stopped. He left his family for *their own* good, so they that they rebuild the life that Luc William Logan broke apart.

It was true, he was only worth what he didn't fuck up.

Billy pissed all that work away because when he got high on Ketamine he turned scared and SOFT and reached out to Bayani. If Bayani travelled all the way to cowshit Hawkins for him, and got taken by the scientists and caged for it, Billy would never forgive himself.

Billy's mouth went desert dry. Was he going to kill *another* member of his family?

He really *did* break everything he touched.

It was too late to call Bayani off. He Knew once Bayani saw Steve looking like frozen bait in the black liquid room, Baya would double down and commit to driving all the way.

What if his last-ditch effort to save Steve, doomed his Kuya (big brother)?

Billy's stomach roiled and he could taste the ash and rancid darkness in the back of his throat. Billy had thought of waiting for Erica to wake up to see if her rainbow light worked. They didn't think they would have to before the exorcism so they didn't think about it. It also took a massive toll on her. Billy didn't want to *risk* her.

But he'd risk Bayani? Je ne suis qu'une merde de chien (I'm a piece of dogshit).

And what if Bayani couldn't save Steve?

Then he would have pissed into the wind for *no reason*. He'd ruin Bayani's life, AND bring the '*Little-Hawkins-House on the Prairie*' family to RUIN too.

54 minutes ago

Billy stared into the filthy toilet of Tonya's vile, backwards Hawkins bathroom. He studied what had just come out of his throat.

It tasted like rancid, acidic charred death, and looked like it too.

Billy hurled about two grams of bubbling grey ash and three egg-sized goops of thick, oily-black tar into the porcelain throne. The goop sorta looked like residue of a pan of lasagna that Ant once tried to make in his Maman's oven. He never let Ant live *that* cooking disaster down. His whole dinky apartment stunk like burned tomatoes and decay for three days after.

Now he was pretty sure his insides were doing the same thing, burning.

Decaying.

He knew that breathing all this fire like a walking flamethrower would have its consequences. Erica would get super tired. He just didn't think he'd actually puke out his own damn *insides*. He didn't even know what parts of his body this was, but his sides pinched and roiled like something was definitely WRONG.

If he was lucky, his body was getting rid of all the non-essential organs like tonsils or appendix first.

But, he had Bulhaeng (shit luck).

His insides wrenched, cramping and jutting with sharp creases of pain, but this was just bitch-pain, like when Mei would be on her damn period. He would ride this out. He had a Bulgasari to distract.

And not only was that going to be *fun*, but it was also pretty damn necessary. It was his fault Steve had gotten possessed in the first place. If he hadn't been so damn Lǔmǎng (reckless), Steve wouldn't have had to use his aura to center him.

Steve, whether he really understood what he did or not, had saved him. HIM. Steve put his life on the line for a misfit, bat-shit crazy,

flip-out who couldn't even prevent his own old man from ripping him out by his nappy mullet out of his own damn Camaro.

He didn't *get* Steve. At *all*. Was he really flirting with him that WHOLE time, or was that the Bulgasari jerking him around for kicks? How much of what he said to him right after the whole fight happened was true? How much was a mind game?

He looked at himself in the grimy mirror. His sallow, haggard, and scared reflection stared blankly back.

Clearly a damn mind-game. Who would flirt with *this*?

He turned on the tap to see clear water pour out. He rinsed out his mouth. Clear water...

Putain (FUCK).

No way was any of it real. *Any* of this. He was still in Hawkins, in his house. He was late for school wasn't he?

POUND. POUND. POUND.

Billy jumped out of his skin at the pounding on the door.

"You done getting pretty in there?" Neil. He was late dropping off Max.

The toilet wouldn't flush.

He'd get blamed for it.

Billy stepped out to see a broad shouldered, grim man in a green button up shirt and camouflage jacket looming over him.

"You didn't even flush. Typical selfish... What kinda manners..." Neil. Neil. Neil. He bolted straight to attention eyes focused on an indeterminate point beyond Neil's left ear.

"It wouldn't work, sir. I'll take responsibility for it after practice." Billy automatically responded, hands behind his back, trying not to flinch or brace for the hit.

Pause.

"...Hey, kiddo, let's just go." The voice sounded too soft and *kiddo*?! Billy blinked. Neil never called him kiddo.

Oh. MERDE. It was that damn cop! Oh, fuck his LIFE.

Just play it cool.

"Sure thing." Billy's face flushed red with humiliation. It was official, his brain was officially fried SPAM. Just throw him in nuthouse and be *done*.

They walked and the chief closed his eyes when they got to the front door. See, Billy figured that the Bulgasari couldn't wheedle his way into his head after what happened, but the others... who knew.

So that's why Cabbage Patch had the idea of blindfolding themselves (or just closing their eyes in chief's case) Billy drove all of them in shifts to Tonya Richards' house.

He'd be pretty fucking shocked if anyone in their goody-two shoes circus recognized where he was taking them. Tonya graduated high school a couple years prior and her mother was loosey-goose hippy who was hot (for a broad), and let them throw parties.

She also lived just a mile and a half away from him, which was *convenient*.

He just blankly led the Chief out to the police truck's passenger side and opened the door so he could fumble his lardass in. He strode around to the driver's side patting the knife, his zippo, and his pack of cigarettes as he eased into the dirty seat.

He waited for that lame joke of 'oh I bet this is the first time you've sat up front in a police car' or 'please don't tell me you've ever driven one of these', but it never came. His anger boiled in him anyway, as he cranked the ignition and the engine baaarrrelly turned over.

Billy slowly eased out of the front yard, focusing his haywire braincells to be alert so he could rock the Bulgasari's world.

Silence.

The chief got cagey and opened his eyes.

"You should have stayed behind. I can do this myself." Billy made the turn onto his street.

"Of course, because that worked out so well for you last time." The chief sounded real fucking *cheeky*. Billy pursed his lips tight and the steering wheel tighter. Blood flushed through his veins.

'Don't lose your cool, Loga. This is for Steve. You need to fix your mess; this is your responsibility.'

"I'm. Not. Your. Responsibility. Just because you got a badge and MORE BAGGAGE doesn't mean you can use me to... pat yourself on the back and say 'Good job chief Cheeseburger, you saved some shitty mutt.'" Billy scathed, gritting his teeth. He was driving slow to ensure he didn't attract any attention from the Bulgasari, and he already wanted to gun it to end this car-ride. Billy itched for the fight. He didn't know why the Chief *insisted* he come.

The Chief dryly laughed.

"If you think this is all about making myself feel better, then you're even more turned-around than I thought." Chief dryly chuckled as his lighter went 'snick'. "You need a wake-up call." Chief inhaled deep as if steadying himself.

Billy itched for a fight as the cigarette ignited.

"Me? HA. My eyes are wide fucking open. Look at yourself in the rearview. You've got some savior complex to come here to rescue Erica. You even brought your daughter here...and talk about 'turned around', what is HER deal?" Billy didn't really intend on changing the subject, but really, what the fuck was SHE about?

He wasn't deaf or stupid. He heard what the Bulgasari said about the Chief. At one point, he had another daughter. He fucked up saving his first daughter over WHO knows what.

The Chief had him by the collar of his shirt and brutally yanked him

across the cab, causing the truck to veer.

"Jane's been through more than you could ever DREAM of. Her life up until recently was HELL and I took her in to protect her, and yes I brought her here. She is here because wanted to *find* and *save* you, so show some goddamn gratitude." Chief Churro bit each word and this time it was Billy's turn to laugh.

So that was it, she wasn't HIS.

He must have taken in Little Miss Sideways just like Maya did him. Billy didn't spot a wedding band on Chief's finger, and he sure as hell didn't look like he could string along a possum, let alone a *mistress*.

Chief Cheesesteak had to be all this crazy girl had.

Talk about bleak.

Though...Maya and Chief kept getting more and more in common.

"I told you all get Erica out, and leave me BE. I told you to get LOST, so this is NOT on me, you FAT JUNKIE." Billy's voice quavered as he turned to face the Chief, taking his gaze fully off the road. His eyes blazed bright and wild, but the Chief's stared right back, locking.

Deadlock.

"You know, you're a *real* piece of work. I never said it *was* on you. You don't need to ask for help to be grateful for it." Chief shoved him back into the drivers' seat and Billy's head hit the passenger side window with some force. "Yes, I did. I risked my daughter, the one I *didn't* fail, because I also vowed to protect and serve all residents of Hawkins, which includes YOU." Chief's voice darkened bitter like black coffee. Jerry had said something similar once after Maya's funeral.

'I risked my partner, your Maya, because we vowed to protect and serve...I think I regret it.' That was the real reason why Jerry quit, not the cripple-mobile. Whether Chief realized it or not, he'd regret going after him with his whole circus afterwards just like Jerry.

Billy's gut soured with a dormant pool of fear. This stupid Chief was

going to go the way of Maya, *Dead*. Then Vivian, Steve, Cabbage, crazy-eyes, all of 'em would pin his death on Billy Loga like a fucking target.

Chief took a deep drag. "You front big and bad, but really you're just barely holding it together, and you don't know how to ask for help." Chief took a deep drag and exhaled smoke through his nose.

Billy saw RED.

"I don't want YOUR help." Billy gritted his teeth; he didn't lie. He didn't even want a glass of water from this cop.

"Newsflash, I don't care if you want it." That didn't sound like a lie either. Billy didn't GET this guy. Why was he so HUNG UP on him? His daughter was back with Steve and Little Hickshit. He could have easily stayed at Tonya's. DAMNIT, he really just wanted to do this ON HIS OWN.

Because now if he didn't protect this fucking cop, that crazy girl would end up on her own, and probably blow up a farm or two with her *mind powers*.

She'd end up worse than Luc William Loga, that was for DAMN sure.

Super max or the needle, or maybe something *worse*.

He'd just end up beaten to death, like Erica's Uncle Josue, if he made it out.

"I don't NEED your help either. Go back to the circus and be a REAL dad. Go look after Little Miss Sideways. Let me do what *I* want." Billy seethe, and his eyes finally landed on his house.

His NOT-Camaro was still parked outside, and even from this distance he could tell it looked like absolute shit. Neil may have made him keep it clean, but he did it because Ant liked it showroom status.

If Antoine rolled in his grave when Max wrecked it, had to be SPINNING to see their baby now.

After Ant died, Marcus inherited the Camaro, but handed the keys over to Billy anyway. It just then clicked the title was still in Marcus' name.

If Billy died here, Marcus would inherit the same car *twice*.

"Oh, so you can go get yourself killed on purpose? So, you can just destroy *more* around you, on *purpose*? Me letting you do what you want ends up with what you really want: you dead and a huge mess for the rest of us." Chief inhaled bright again, and Billy's pulse jacked up.

"You don't have A FUCKING CLUE what I want." Billy yelled, face flushing hot with blood.

The chief didn't react at all.

"I got your number, kid." Chief replied, confident as a fucking American flag.

"Pollas en vinagre!(not a chance)" That phrase literally meant, 'dicks in vinegar' and one of his favorites to sling around with Javier. Billy whipped the steering wheel and heel-toed the police truck into a rough powerslide. Chief held on tight to the 'oh shit' handle and Billy maneuvered the truck to peel to a perfect stop next to his precious NOT-Camaro.

"When I drag you back to Hawkins, I'm revoking your license and signing you up for mandatory community service." The Chief cursed and Billy cackled good and loud. What a joke! Like he'd actually be getting out of this Bat Country *alive*.

He threw open the door and vaulted out of the truck, grabbing the gas canister from the back seat.

"Like I said before, you'd have to catch me first, which is about as unlikely as..." Billy paused in flipping off the Chief off.

Neil's house lurched in front of them, threatening, dark and positively *alive*. Needles of dread shot through Billy's lungs. No way this was just some damn house, this was a beast in disguise. Javier would say this breathed and groaned, and had its own fangs and heartbeat.

He didn't *jive* the whole, 'face your demons' garbage, but this was exactly what this was turning into. His stomach jabbed with fresh pain as it twisted around itself. This haunted house was HIS business, and he was not going to have the death of this shǎ bī (stupid cunt) Cop on his conscience.

He was the King, damnit, and for *once* Cabbage had a semi-decent idea: distract the Bulgasari, and get some more weapons. Une Pierre deux coups (two birds one stone).

Which is why the rolled up to Neil's old shit-brick house and why he had his eye on the prize:

Neil's 'protect America war chest'.

By the lawnmower in the shed was locked the prized loot, a flac jacket, a few different grenades, a pair of binoculars, and an old rifle he stole off some 'commie zipperhead'. Though, the footlocker was missing the key ingredient to Neil's 'Defend America Special', his issued M16. Neil kept his pride and joy loaded under his side of the bed. *Jesus Christo*, now that Billy thought about it, it was a miracle Neil didn't empty a few steaming rounds in him before.

Neil probably thought he wasn't worth the ammunition. If so, he was right.

Billy's palm slicked with sweat on the metal handle of the gas canister. Despite his earlier bravado, Billy's mouth ran dry. His whole body prickled in an restless panic. He could see jagged shapes shifting in the woods behind Neil's shithole of a house.

He swore he saw Neil's furious face in the filthy, cracked front window.

NO. Neil was dead. Gone. EVISCERATED.

Steve's bright smile when he shoved his shoulder on the hood of the Buick flashed through his mind.

Billy wanted to slap himself, this was for *Steve*. Steve dying in Tonya's mother's bed because of him (which no one deserved to sleep in, let alone DIE in), and here he was standing here pissing his jeans over a

rathole he wanted to burn down anyway.

For a split second, he wished Steve could be here when he lit this fucker up bright as New Year's Day on Santa Monica Pier.

'Porte tes couilles, Loga' (nut up), you have a house to loot and torch, and a Bulgasari to taunt.

Billy slammed the door shut on the truck, swallowing hard, pulse thumping in his ears. If Cabbage and Little Hickshit could pull off that exorcism, he could do this.

Javier and himself once helped Javier's madre exorcise their cat, Dulce, that out of nowhere started clawing her and Javier's calves to ribbons. Billy didn't think it would work, but damn if Dulce didn't turn into back to his cuddly, *pussy* self. Here, they were short on candles but still, it'd STICK.

The Chief waved his hand in front of him to get his attention like a *dāiguā* (idiot).

"Toolshed in the back. It has the army goods we need." Billy tongued out his bottom lip and jutted his jaw to the half dilapidated shed half visible in the yard on the right side of the house.

The shed squatted behind the kitchen steps Neil had kicked him down, but in front of the woods that Voyeur Byers had hidden in to snap those photos.

"Right...from 'Nam. Do you know if he kept his flac jacket? It would be good for Dustin." The Chief asked neutrally, drawing his revolver, scanning the grimy, silent woods.

Billy's free hand twitched, itching for his knife, but he fought the instinct. He didn't need the Chief thought he was losing his edge or his *mind*.

"Claro, but, you should give that kid a GUN and teach him to use it instead of that slingshot." Billy answered distractedly. Did a curtain move in the window?

Mei would swear it did. He missed her.

"...it's not going to come to that." The chief grumbled and began to trudge through the sticky grass over to the shed as if the house in front of them wasn't about to reach out and DEVOUR them. Billy didn't know if the Chief was just that much braver than he was, or just colossally stupid.

Probably *both*.

Just like the tip-off at the buzzer, Billy broke into a jog to catch up to the Chief, leaving the gas canister in front of the side steps he was kicked down not two days earlier. All he had to do was deal with the Chief, get his stash, torch the house to fuck with the Bulgasari, and make it back to Tonya's.

Cakewalk.

The Chief made it to the sunken shed locked with a heavy, rusty chain and padlock. Billy picked up a flowerpot and revealed the ancient, old key that opened the padlock. He knew where Neil hid all his keys, but that didn't mean he made use of that information. It was a mindfuck, a *test*. Neil could tell when his shit was even a millimeter out of place.

He gave the key to the Chief without a peep, he was busy what he did best: listening.

But aside from the Chief messing with the rusty padlock, he didn't pick up any Korean whispers, rustling or anything. The hairs standing at attention on the back of his neck told him the Bulgasari was skulking around close by. Billy would bet his life on it, and probably would end up doing so.

No. He was nastier and badder than whatever the Bulgasari threw at him. Fuck him for going after his King.

He was going to piss all over the ruins of his Kingdom.

A heavy scraping click and grind snapped Billy back to the door of the shed the Chief managed to unlock. He slowly opened the door and switched out his six shooter for the flashlight.

Billy, tense as a barbed wire fence around a police impound lot, took

out his knife and flipped it.

"Looks clear. I'm going to go in first. It's that footlocker in the back, right?" Chief's flashlight lit all the dust and fluff up in the stagnant air. The flashlight touched its soft light on tools hanging up, another bottle of Wild Turkey 101, and landed on the ancient footlocker in the back. Billy swallowed thickly and concentrated on keeping steady.

Was this a trap, like in Indiana Jones? Sang Hoon and Mei loved that dumb fucking movie. Maybe Neil triggered it to explode. Maybe he was *here*, watching them.

"Y-yeah." Billy whispered pupils pin-pricks. He didn't mean to sound like a scared pussy, but he did anyway. The chief gave him an eyeful.

There was no way he could back up the Chief, BAD PLAY. He was too fucking reckless to make sure backwater Johnny Law got back to his crazy daughter. Chief was going to end up dead just like Maya.

They'd all blame him too. Steve. Erica. Vivian. They'd call him a damn Cop Killer. You *can't* bounce back from that.

So, he had to trick the Chief.

He'd be pissed at first, but he'd eventually get that he should have just stayed behind. Pulling the white knight hero act just got you killed.

Look at Steve.

The Chief, quieter and more carefully than Billy had ever SEEN him move slipped into the shed. And right as his potato-shaped ass got a few steps inside Billy slammed the door shut, and fastened the padlock like he had practiced it a million times.

POUND. POUND. POUND. The shed door trembled like Billy's bottom lip. Why was he so afraid right now? He didn't *get* it.

"Billy, now is not the time for your damn pranks!" The pounding continued and it clicked. Oh that's why, the pounding. He kept reminded him of *Neil*.

It tracked with time back in LA, when Neil found out about what happened to Max and pounded down Jerry's door. The only reason Neil left without Billy's scalp was because Ant grabbed Jerry's side piece and planted his feet between him and Neil. That must have been what *did* it. What pushed Neil to lynch Ant.

No one stood up to Neil and came out *alive*.

"Who locked who up now?! Junkie PIG. If you know what's good for you and your SIDEWAYS Kid, you'll stay out of my way, grasa kupal (fat prick)." Billy hissed through the door with volcanic fury.

"Billy, goddamnit, let me *help*, you can't do this alone -" He cut off the Chief.

"I can do whatever I want, SUCKER! I'm FREE! And if you think for a LA second I ever gave a shit about any of you, you're dumber than you fucking look." Billy taunted, voice high and zipping with of adrenaline. He spat on the ground for effect, and he knew the Chief hear him do it.

Again, Billy wasn't born yesterday. He knew that the Sheriff could probably bust out of that ramshackle shed pretty soon. Yet, when he did, he certainly wouldn't be going to *help* Billy Loga. It might take him a bit to find it, but make his way back to the circus tent with his where he BELONGED.

Buzzer set. Tip-off. Plantez vos pieds!

Billy picked up the gas canister and spilled a trail of gas through the dead grass up the sticky, tar covered steps that led to the screen door to the kitchen. His mouth dried out again as he yanked open the screen door of his house. He kicked in the rotted side door just like he always wanted to.

The satisfaction rang hollow because his hands shook like a 5.0 earthquake. He popped the top on the gas canister and began shaking the metallic smelling gasoline throughout the kitchen and through the living room.

"Shout...shout..shout at the devil..." Billy hummed one of the favorite

Motley Crue songs, Looks Could Kill, as he stepped carefully across the floor, splashing the gas all over that sofa Neil would glare at him for sitting on. He splashed it on Susan's knitting shit. The TV Max always hogged.

He'd burn it all.

He expected the matted, sodden carpet to give out from underneath him, a Cujo to jump out at him, or both. The moldy, blackened walls of the house choked and closed in on him the closer as he finally got to the master bedroom.

The room he could never enter without *expressed* permission.

UGH FUCK IT. IT'S A ROOM. AND NEIL IS DEAD.

Black snares of terror seized his lungs cold anyway. His sides roiled and before he knew it, he puked up ash again into the living room. The acidic, chalky taste lingered thickly in his mouth. The stench of gasoline definitely didn't help.

A faint scratching noise scraped from the kitchen and Billy whipped around.

Nothing.

He white-knuckled his grip on his knife. No, *Neil's* knife. He sloshed more gasoline around as he ducked into the rancid bedroom. Billy caught a warped, half-ashen portrait above the dresser. Neil, Susan, and Max all scratched out and blackened to rot. He saw the belt that Neil would use to 'correct his mistakes' with hanging on the wall. His hunting boots stood ragged against the wall he would use to instill a sense of responsibility' in Billy's ribs.

Tunnel vision, the rifle under the bed was the only thing that mattered. That and the money Billy stashed there. He hid it in Neil's room because Billy knew he'd look everywhere else.

Billy didn't know he was panting until he felt his own chest as he got to his knees next to the haunted, black draped bed.

He couldn't see what was under the blackened, rotted bed at all. The

bed covering wavered a bit. Was that his own breath? Wind through the drafty house?

Or another creature from myth and movies?

Billy's senses prickled on high alert. Javier would be laying into him that the gun and his stash wasn't worth it, to get out. Mei would be shrieking at him for his recklessness.

But Ant...

Antoine would be telling him to get that gun and stick it to the Demon that dared try to kill his King. Even if Steve never wanted anything to do with him. Even if he ended up back with Wheeler, he'd STILL burn the Bulgasari's world for hurting him, for trying to own him.

Steve wasn't a *possession*.

And let it be known Billy Loga *never* backed down from a fight.

"GOT YA!" With a sudden exhale, and a tightly gripped knife, he flung up the decayed shroud and swiped out with the knife.

Air.

Nothing lunged, nothing *bit*, nothing came for him.

Covered in a layer of thick ashy dust, lay the rifle, He grabbed the rifle and gave it a once-over. He had no idea if it was too dirty to fire, much less where the safety was. He didn't *do* guns.

Then, he found the loose floorboard, now almost rotted out completely. He gripped it and peeled the soft wood back and reached into the gap. Something scurried around past his hand, but his fingertips grazed the treasure.

Marcus' Lakers bag. He grabbed his stash.

CRASH.

Living room.

He was all alone. Just as he wanted to be.

But he was El Lobo Feroz, and he'd plant his feet. He looped the dirty, purple canvas strap of the Lakers bag across his body, and then did the same for the M16 now across on his back.

He tapped out a cigarette, and put it between his lips.

"THAT'S RIGHT you fucked up BIG TIME going after MY KING. I'M GOING TO TEAR YOU APART." Billy shouted, hoping his voice didn't sound so shaky as he thought it did. Billy waited, listening.

A heavy, creaking footstep echoed through the living room, and he bolted up.

If it was the Chief, he'd shout something *dumb*.

Billy bit down on the filter of the cigarette, a flash of Neil picking up that lamp...fear noosed him taut.

Steve wasn't scared when he helped the kids before he had his shining armor. He couldn't be scared here. How DARE this Bulgasari try to SCARE him?! EL Lobo Feroz didn't fear ANYTHING, he just attacked.

Billy dug deep and bolted to the bedroom doorway that led back into the living room. With one fluid motion he flicked open the zippo and lit the cigarette. He sucked in a lungful of air and blew before he even knew what he faced.

Poof.

Nothing but clouds of chalky ash and dark smoke spewed out of his mouth. Billy's gut twisted in shock and pain.

Gachi eobsneun (Worthless). Intuil (useless).

The plume of smoke and ash cleared to reveal a twisted figure blocking the front door.

Billy's heart full-out stopped and his stomach twisted tight and spiked to his heels. Billy couldn't scream if he was *paid* to.

The gnarled, dark figure loomed over him by at least a foot. It was all smoldering black mist, ashen grey skin, and long, jagged sharp claws. It took a step towards him with its freakishly long arms swinging out wide for a paralyzing strike.

All of this wasn't what chilled Billy's bones to ice and loosen his bladder, however.

Neil LIVED.

"You're too late Billyyyyyyy." Neil's voice hissed through Neil's mouth. His squinty eyes rolled around in his head, crimson and slit like a snake. Inside his mouth, Billy caught the sheen of saliva drip from countless fangs.

Billy shrunk, jaw dropping and the burning cigarette tumbled from his lips.

"...maman." Billy's mind blanked out to static and his whole body tingled.

Fight or flight.

Neil took a mammoth step forward, rumbling the floorboards which finally shook Billy to action.

FIGHT.

He shelved the knife and swung the rifle around. Sorry Maman, but he thought this one time, his promise was made to be broken. He flicked what he hoped was the safety and pulled the trigger.

Click. *Click*. Like a spent lighter.

Billy didn't know what went wrong, he *knew* he should have stuck with the knife.

FLIGHT!

He slung the rifle back around again, and a gurgling laugh escaped from Neil's fanged mouth.

Neil lashed out with his spindly, clawed hand. Only because of his experience with fighting Bayani did he dodge in time into a low lunge. Damp drywall and wood exploded out from Neil's strike. The ashed cigarette tumbled from his lips as his whole body shook.

Chūzōu (time to bounce!).

Billy dove left towards the kitchen, rifle bouncing harshly against his back.

Not a second later the entire load-bearing wall of the living room exploded into debris, dust and splinters. Billy flung himself to the left again around the corner into the kitchen.

His pulse jack-rabbed hotly in his neck, behind his ears. He had to distract Neil and stall for more time. He had to be worth *something*.

Billy sneezed on the vapors coming from the house. OH. The *gasoline*. Billy flipped open his trusty zippo, coaxing it to spark.

"You think I don't know what you're doing?!" Neil's fanged mouth crooked up into that SMUG smirk he'd always when he was correcting his behavior. A strong, elongated muscled arm struck him down to the floor, claws catching and carving his skin from his side. Billy hissed in fresh, raw pain, and his jeans dampened from the spilled gas. The lighter flew from his grasp as Neil picked it up and threw it out the already shattered front window.

Oh putain (oh fuck)!

Neil beat his worthless ass in Hawkins and he'd beat him again here. Only he was the REAL reaper this time, not like last Friday night when he ONLY got kicked through the screen door.

Billy just managed to scoot on his back into the kitchen, through the puddles of gasoline.

He had to get outside. Kitchen door behind him. He lunged for the door handle with his left hand like his life depended on it.

Got it.

A rumble behind him.

"Shhhhhiiiiiiiiiiyyyyyya" Billy howled high as one of Neil's claws slashed across his shoulder from left shoulder and caught on the rifle. The strap digging into his shoulder forced him off balance and sprawling to the ground.

Pain ripped through his back, but he wasn't going down here. He wasn't *soft*, he was harder than this. He had been hurt way WORSE than this. He stabbed back blindly with his knife and slashed something solid.

Neil shrieked and that gave Billy an opening to twist around back to the open door and stagger to his knees. Though something slimy and thick and strong as jumper cables lassoed his left thigh and whipped it out from underneath him.

Billy hit the curling linoleum floor hard again, splashing gas and slamming his right temple on the edge of the door jamb. Stars and blackness flooded the corners of his vision. Though he still caught a glimpse of the outside, and saw that the shed door looked closed STILL.

Maybe that chief really was as dumb as he looked.

"NO ESCAPE FOR YOU, YOU WORTHLESS FAGGOT!" Billy knew the only reason those claws didn't cleave him up was because of the rifle protected him.

"Venir a mi (come at me)—" the taunt died on Billy's lips and he realized just what had grappled his leg. Neil's jaw had split down the middle of his chin and a long, thick black as pitch tongue had coiled tourniquet tight around his leg.

Nightmare fuel. Billy screamed.

Terror rushed through his veins as a gargantuan, spider-like arm raised up, claws clacking.

"You'reeeee coming with me. You're mine..." Possession. Neil thought he was nothing but a burden, or a weight. But Neil was also crystal clear that no matter *how* Gachi eobsneun (Worthless), how much of a

psicótica flip-out he was, that Billy was HIS.

Neil had him AGAIN.

Was this all some scripted Stephen King plot? Neil couldn't kill him in the real Hawkins, in his real kitchen, but he'd kill him in this twisted one. But Neil wasn't trying to kill him, he was trying to PUNISH him. His mind flashed to Steve fighting against him.

That's what the Bulgasari wanted all along, to use him against the others, right? The thought of him punching Steve's face in again...running him through with his knife.

"Try again, you oozing CUNT!" He may not have his fire, but he had his knife.

He double downed and slashed out at the tongue with the knife, slicing it clean in two.

A howling, otherworldly shriek, just like one that coke head made when he kicked in his teeth, pierced the air and made Billy's skin crawl like worms. The severed tongue flailed through the air, splattering black blood across Billy and the walls. The nub finally retracted back into Neil's cleft palette mouth. Fucking sick.

Billy scrambled through the doorway. He just had to get free of Neil's haunted house. Get free of Neil. Billy staggered into daylight, or what this hell hole tried to peddle them as daylight. Almost there.

Right before he could look up, the entire exterior wall of the kitchen exploded out. Rotten debris nailed Billy in his wounded back and the back of his head.

Billy yelped as his knee caught the edge of a concrete step, and he bit it rolling down them like some cripple.

Classic Loga fuck up.

His gut turned and he wretched damp ash and acidic globs of bile onto the blackened grass. That didn't matter though, he just had to hold out until Erica gave the 'all clear' signal. The signal that told him that Steve was OK. That his 'half-court shot at the buzzer' idea of an

exorcism cured him.

Steve *would* live through this. He'd play in the basketball states tournament, move out of Redneck central... he'd *get out*.

Maging malaya, be free.

Reverberations rumbled through the putrid ground. Footsteps.

"You CANNOT run. Your friends, and the pretty boy you desire, cannot HIDE from me for long. I WILL find them and kill them. With or without you!" Neil thundered angrily, rearing his head through the busted open doorway.

Billy was born to break and be broken.

'I won't let you down either.' Steve looked him dead in his eyes. His brown eyes steadied him, they were always so solid, warm, and soft, like worn leather. He couldn't just *give up* and let Steve down. Let *himself* down.

Fuck this house. Fuck the Bulgasari and FUCK NEIL HARGROVE.

HE KILLED ANT. HE KIDNAPPED ERICA. HE DRAGGED THEM BOTH TO THAT TREE. HE MADE STEVE COME HERE.

HE HAD TO PAY.

"kkeojyeo jugda (fuck off and die), my friends will EAT YOUR HEART, you puta enferma (sick cunt). And if you were REALLY the King of your domain, you'd KNOW where they are! But you DON'T, so that makes ME EL REY DEL MUNDO!" Billy found his fury and brandished his knife in an offensive stance. Sure, he was out-gunned, but he'd figure something out.

'Move like water. Always get up when you get knocked down.' He shrugged off the rifle and the duffle bag, rolling his shoulders.

Neil regarded the shed, jagged fangs snapping open and shut. Did he know about the Chief?

"You fail them, just like your whore of a mother, that pig Maya, your

faggot boyfriend, all died helping you, you undeserving little shit." Those words pierced. Those words were *Neil's*. Those words were *true*, but also NOT. It couldn't all be on him, sixty percent, maybe, but he didn't ask for *any* of this.

"No, *you* killed Antoine Kabore. That was YOUR sign around his neck. You hung him from our basketball court!" Billy edged towards the shed. He had to get the Chief out so he would fuck off and get Erica and the rest out of this Hellscape.

Erica would call Mei and tell her about Ant, she *promised* him.

"That Harrington boy you desire with your filthy affliction will die here because of you...." Neil, from the top of the steps, leapt high, landing on the grass, snarling, claws glinting.

"HOT TAKE, put up or SHUT UP." Billy taunted, waving him over, challenging Neil dead in his glowing, crimson eyes. He had to fake left, and bolt right towards the shed door.

Neil threw out his right arm, back to the right to the police truck and the Camaro.

Mā de (oh shit).

The truck groaned, rattled and then, as if someone strapped it in a slingshot, it clattered like a train over Billy's head. Billy ducked on instinct only to watch in vain as the truck collided into the shed with a deafening thunder of wood, metal, and glass. The impact rocked the ground and the dust cloud that plumed out choked him.

The truck and the shed twisted and crumpled together into a flattened junkyard. Billy's stomach rusted out hollow, and his jaw dropped.

He told the Chief *not* to follow him! Why did NO ONE LISTEN to him?!

"Another responsibility you have *failed*." Neil's fanged face twisted into what Billy assumed was another smug grin.

"You've done it now. You killed the father of a girl with crazy mind

powers. He was a decent cop; he actually GAVE a shit about me for FUCK all reasons." Billy's face hardened like quick dry cement and his eyes blue out in shock.

Billy Loga killed the Chief. That sideways retard girl would end up a psicópata like him. Worse than him. Sang Hoon would be shoving him by now, screaming in his face that he couldn't let people who have mwonga ilh-eul (something to lose) into his life.

"The *soviet* SPY is contained, and will be disposed of soon..." Neil mocked sharply, his voice like metal grinding against stone. That did it, no one MOCKED him.

Billy flipped the knife in his hand then quicker than Ripley, Marcus' Doberman, he lunged forward. A sinewy charcoal arm whipped out and before Billy could even think, Neil's clawed hand grabbed the blade of the knife and wrenched it from his tight grip.

Neil hurled the knife back and to the right into the front yard where his lighter ended up.

Flaaaaash, Flaaaaash.

The signal light came from the road, far off. Talk about coming full circle. Just like what happened Friday night with that voyeur Byers' camera, Little Hickshit shown her lighthouse-bright light at his place from Tonya's. Erica blasted her signal *just* like he told her to. She really was a damn good listener.

"T'as la tête dans le cul, et tu t'en rends même pas compte. (Your head is so far up your own ass you don't even know it). Steve WON'T be another Antoine!" Billy's lungs filled to the brim with helium. The exorcism worked and Steve would be alright!

It was *all* worth it.

"I've found them. I'll have your soul then I'll cut down your friends, one by one until all threats, foreign and domestic, are destroyed." Neil stalked towards him, and Billy planted his feet.

Maybe he could juke Neil and make a break for his Camaro, but FUCK he didn't have the keys. He definitely didn't have time to

hotwire it, or maybe he did. Billy chanced a look beyond the corner of the house where the Camaro sat.

Maybe the light was playing tricks but he swore he saw something move by his car. Probably a Cujo lining up a sneak attack.

"Not fucking likely." He hissed. He served his purpose... but... he didn't *want* to go down here.

Then Neil's entire chest cavity divided and his ribcage hinged open like a venus fly trap. Inside Neil's organs all glistened and pulsate. The revolting smell of rotten fish and guts spewed into the air. It reminded him of when Bayani would take those four month long fishing gigs and would come back *reeking*.

A vortex of black and red haze twisted into the chest cavity like a vacuum.

A familiar headache spiked at his right temple. Billy doubled over in agonizing pain, puking up more ash, but this time at least there was less of it.

"Your soul is mine. You were presented to me, your my possession!" Billy's own heart skipped three beats. The Bulgasari couldn't get his soul before because he had Steve had protected him.

Now...

He had no one.

POP PAP PAP.

Billy may not know a damn thing about guns, but he knew gunshots.

The sharp, migraine stopped as soon as it started and Billy glanced up.

Neil's exposed heart popped like a water balloon filled with cheap cooking wine. Neil gasped and his chest zipped closed with a wet slurp. He immediately dropped to the dirt, scrabbling in the dirt.

Who?

Then a familiar sight sailed through the grey sky in a perfect arc.

A Wild Turkey 101 Molotov cocktail hit Neil square on the back and he erupted into flame.

Vibrant heat hit Billy as his field of vision lit up. Fire. And a lot of it. The liquor mixed with the spilled gasoline and raced through the lawn, and the steps, igniting the kitchen doorway. Neil writhed, snarled, and screamed on the ground, but Billy knew no amount of 'Stop, Drop and Rock and Roll' would save him.

His Camaro barking and growling to life caused Billy to finally look over and damn.

It was the chief!?

Relief smacked him like a baseball bat to the ribs, and he smirked in victory.

NOT a classic Loga fuck up.

Maybe that god Maman prayed to *did* answer sometimes.

"Hurry up, you pain in the ass!" Billy never thought he'd be thankful to hear that potato shaped Chief's voice from the driver's seat of his Camaro, but this *was* backwards-ville.

Billy picked up the rifle and his Lakers bag and booked it to his car as the house erupted in scorching plumes of smoke and fire. Shame he couldn't stop to enjoy it.

He settled into the passenger expecting, even wanting a beating. He spotted his keys in the ignition. OH, the cop must have taken them as evidence. Weird he hung onto them though.

"... I heard and saw it all." The chief stated neutral, the kind of practiced neutral only cops or fathers could do. Billy's throat swelled shut as he shifted in the unfamiliar passenger seat of his own car.

So, the Chief not only confirmed he was a *faggot*, but also had it bad for *Steve*. He probably pieced together information about his Maman, Maya, and Ant.

Chief floored it in reverse and raised his right hand, going for the revolver in the cupholder. Billy closed his eyes and lifted his hands in surrender, bracing for the pistol whip. Please not the ear.

"Damnit, RELAX. Do I look like I want to BEAT you? *Here*. Christ *almighty*." Chief groaned and Billy's eyes opened wide and skeptical.

The Chief was holding his zippo.

Chief punched the gas and let the engine roar.

"I won't say anything. I'm practiced at NDAs." Chief tossed the zippo Billy caught it, turning it over in his hands like a good luck charm. "I saw your mess in the bathroom, and on the lawn as well. When Jane overexerts herself, her powers they harm her too. On top of that, you need *real* help. I'd bet my left arm you have PTSD from Neil Hargrove and what you lived through in Compton." Chief informed, and Billy shook all over. He wasn't gonna be beat, AND the Chief STILL wanted to help him?

Billy began to protest, but the Chief held up a finger.

"Keep your mouth SHUT, for once. Here's how it's going to go from here on out. One, you're going to fall in line, you don't get to decide who does what, I do. Two, you're going to rest your damn powers. Three, you're going to wise up, and stop asking for the Upside-Down, or ME to punish you. You're a *kid*, you've made your fair share of mistakes, *sure*, but your mother, that detective who took you in after acted as her CI, and that other boy aren't dead because of *you*. Don't mistake us being here to get you out for being the reason we are all here in the first place." The Chief finished his lecture, which FINE, but how did he know he was an informant? Those loose-lipped cops at the 77th must've dished his dirt. If Steve didn't know about he was involved in back in South Central, the Chief must have kept his mouth SHUT.

The Chief could be trusted after all.

Billy nodded, sniffing. Was he crying? Couldn't be.

Pause.

"You're not a half-bad shot, for a hick Sherriff." Billy pursed his lips and swallowed, wiping his nose with that purple hanky that he still kept from Erica.

"You're not a half-bad with a knife, for a smart-ass punk." Billy's face scrunched up. He left Neil's knife in the yard. He'd have to get another.

Present Time

"We're ready." Jane stated coming back into the room and Billy clicked his tongue, looking at everyone.

"Alright, two things, one don't shout or spout shit, Bayani isn't a fan of loudmouths." Billy pointedly looked at Cabbage.

"He means you, Loudmouth." Erica sassed sleepily, barely keeping her eyes open. It lacked the earlier tartness he was used to hearing from her.

"He's literally the loudest person ever. I've heard and quieter and smarter tractors." Cabbage huffed. Billy ignored the dig.

"Two, Bayani is ZEN as a Tibetan monastery, but don't PUSH it on his appearance." Billy eyed the Chief on this one.

Their surroundings warped before the Chief could ask what he meant.

One minute they were in Tonya Richards mother's bedroom (which through her mother he intimately knew and would take that information to the *grave*), the next him the whole three ring circus had teleported to a pristine, powdered sand beach.

All Malibu blue sky, teal water, and golden sunshine. The air caught still in his lungs, but instead of smelling salt, he didn't smell anything. The beach extended endlessly in each direction.

"This is *some* hallucination." Vivian murmured and Billy scrunched his nose. Jane turned around looking around like a kid at Disneyland.

"...Did it work?!" Cabbage asked, kicking at sand.

"Yes, he's here, and he made this." Sideways pointed to the ocean.

Out of a cresting, turquoise wave, sauntered a silhouette. He smoothly approached them as if he was one with the damn sea.

He knew that thick black braid, and arrow straight posture from anywhere.

Bayani.

Dry as a bone, he swept up the beach, dark eyes scanning him. He was rocking those aqua high-heeled pumps (which somehow didn't sink into the sand) which he wore to his Maman's funeral, skin-tight, dark jeans, and a white ribbed tank top, covered by a rugged black motorcycle jacket. A strand of cheap purple mardi-gras beads bounced on his chest. Billy never quite understood how he could pull off such bullshit fashion and look so HARD.

And to top it off, his had on his signature black cherry lipstick. What a fucking diva, he didn't change a BIT.

"Bitchin' heels." Billy heard crazy-eyes murmur from behind him.

"Jane. Language, please. I get it *now*." He heard the Chief moan.

Despite the earlier panic, the borderline dread, an old emotion exploded unexpected in his chest.

Relief. Joy. *Home*.

Baya smiled huge and genuine, cheeks appling and red lips bowed. One by one he removed his pumps and placed them next to each other just like he would if he were entering a house.

Billy didn't even know he was smiling back just as hard until he realized his cheeks hurt.

"Oh they're definitely brothers. They smile the same." He heard Vivian joke a bit behind him.

Baya sauntered over to him, so much taller than his 5'6" frame carried him.

"Bay-" and that's when it came, a flash of a black and jeans and Billy barely had time to block a greeting roundhouse kick with his left hand. Sand flew everywhere and into his *eye*.

"Goddammit-" Billy swung out with a right hook. It was immediately caught and in a swift movement. Billy sort-of let that happen. He preferred this to a handshake any day, sand or no sand.

Billy braced to be thrown to the sand, but instead Baya opted to twist his arm behind his back. Then he effortlessly wrenched and applied enough pressure to let Billy know that he could break his wrist like snapping a Popsicle stick.

"You've lost your edge since I've been gone, Kuya (big brother). I saw that kick coming a mile away." Billy chuckled, knowing it wasn't in the least bit true. Baya's smooth hands remained tight on his arm as his other hand reached up and flicked him the temple. Bata could be such an immature little *shit*.

"Really, runt?" Bayani's soft, light hearted voice blanketed the room in a calm note as he released Billy. Billy knew that Bayani knew he let him win easy. He didn't have time to fuck around with his older brother in some sort of trip down happy-go-lucky memory lane when Steve was *dying* on the sand.

"As much as I'd love to shoot the shit, and tell you for the last time, you can't call people taller than you, *runt*, I...we...need your help." Billy backed up a bit and moved a little towards Steve, laying in the middle of them all on the powdery sand.

Bayani pointed to himself incredulously, feigning confusion. Baya was playing coy for some reason.

Oh, he wanted an *intro*. That DIVA.

"This is Bayani, from right to left you got Cabbage, Vivian Sinclair, Jane, Chief, the sleeping girl scout is Erica Sinclair, the passed out one is Steve Harrington." Billy shifted uncomfortably; he had no idea

if Bayani knew just how close he was to *certain* members of this misfit circus.

"I've seen you all, The Magician, The Scholar, The Guardian, The Shepherd, The Priestess, and lastly The Dragon." Bayani's soft gaze hit Jane, Cabbage, Vivian, Chief, Erica, and lastly Steve. He didn't need Bayani to tell him he was 'The Demon'.

Bayani's dark eyes sparked at Billy as he waved to everyone. Oh, he knew *something*, and Billy knew he'd never hear the END of it.

"My name is DUSTIN HENDERSON, NOT a certain cruciferous vegetable, and yeah we've heard about you. Billy says you can see the future, so can you see if Steve will be OK? Can you see how we will beat the Mind Flayer?" Cabbage shot off his mouth just like he warned him NOT to.

"Too many different outcomes." Bayani shook his head walked up to Cabbage who, to Billy's credit, didn't back down. "I see glimpses and hear chords of what is arcane, what is lost, the ties that bind us, and what *may* come to be." Bayani smiled warmly, snapping his fingers. A vision of Max, Lucas and Susan came forth walking into Uncle Ted's house, holding what looked like McDonalds. In an instant the scene was gone.

"Max! Lucas! Is that right now?!" Cabbage's jaw dropped. Billy noticed that Vivian visibly relaxed as well. He forgot for a moment she had more than one kid.

"He's special, Dustin. When I looked for him, he found me and pulled me in. He saw me first. He's a seer." Sideways girl finally piped up and FLOORED Billy like a charge in basketball. She had Bayani dead to rights.

"You are *far* more gifted than I." Bayani complimented, and he swore he saw that girl blush in that way that girls do when they get a crush. Bayani wasn't going for that though, it was always just what happened.

"ENOUGH with the chit chat and magic, let's speed this along, kid." Hop shifted, as if expecting a fight, but trying to talk one down.

Billy bolted to attention. That was one thing that would send Baya over the deep end, being talked down to and PUSHED. Condescension or being rushed was frowned upon in Filipino culture.

Baya's smile shifted so subtle that someone only caught it if you knew him *real* well.

"Chief Hopper, he's no 'kid', he's a grown man and I appreciated seeing that my Lucas is safe and sound." Vivian to the fucking rescue. She shifted a sleeping Erica in her arms.

Bayani winked sharp and smiled sharper at Sheriff Slip-up. Billy rolled his eyes. Bayani just turned thirty-one on New Years day and *preened* because he definitely didn't look it.

"From the fragments of I've seen and heard, *my* particular expertise is not what is needed." Bayani smiled sadly and Billy's heart constricted. "However... I think I can guide you all in helping your *good* friend, runt. Plantez vos pieds." Bayani smiled and turned to raise his perfect eyebrows knowingly. That's what he was hinting at, he KNEW about STEVE.

Billy didn't say anything as he looked down to Steve who was laying in the sand and hadn't stirred. A desperate itching in his lungs urged him to grab the lapels of Bayani's heavy bomber jacket and yell 'Anything.'

Cabbage took a seat in the sand clumsily next to him.

"I'll need to eliminate distractions to help him...I suppose I'll pull the car over here." Bayani looked back and despite the situation, burst out in laughter.

Bayani had his license revoked four years ago when he rear-ended an ice cream truck going 60 miles per hour, in a 25 mile per hour zone, in *reverse*. He claimed the music from the ice cream truck gave him a vision, but Billy was just pretty sure that Bayani was fleeing the scientists again.

That left the question of whose car Bayani had. Bayani, unlike himself, didn't hotwire cars.

"You can *drive* and do this vision with El?!" Cabbage finally chimed in the family discussion.

"It's easy when everyone pulls aside." Bayani shrugged it off as blue and red lights blinked on the ceiling above them. Distant police sirens blared through the chorus of 'Paranoid' by Black Sabbath. Ozzy Osborne was punctuated with a single, deep bark.

'snick' it clicked.

"Anak ng patina (son of a gun)! Jerry actually lent you his old cruiser? And is *Ripley* with you? Jerry and Marcus have both lost it." Billy couldn't imagine what Jerry hit his head on to agree to lend Bayani the cruiser. Marcus letting Bayani depart with his precious baby, Ripley, was also obscene.

"They've been desperate for a looong time, Loga." Bayani hinted softly without turning around. Oh, was this some sort of guilt trip?

"Huwag magsimula (Don't start), Kuya." Billy hissed menacingly.

Bayani, quicker than a rattlesnake, grabbed him by the collar of his ripped blue shirt.

"Hindi ako nagsisimula kahit ano, sinusubukan ko na lutasin ang lahat. (I'm not starting anything, I'm trying to resolve everything)." Bayani's placid but cold tone could cut through concrete. His eyes slashed dark above his cheeks and his red lips creased into a thin red line. Billy then really felt like a pile of shit. He was the one asking Bayani for help, so really the third degree was deserved.

"Kakausapin kita mamaya. (I'll talk to you later)." Bayani smiled and let Billy off the hook. He tugged off his leather jacket and folded it, placing it into the sand.

"OK, we get it, you speak other languages. ENGLISH!" Billy ignored Cabbage.

Bayani's tribal tattoos came into full view, lacing and crossing down the outsides of his arms and onto the backs of his hands like spades. Billy also spotted the sheath tucked into the back of his jeans. Bayani brought along his prized, 11 inch long curved Garab knife that his

father passed down to him.

The room began to warp away into the familiar black liquid room which was all for the best because he was sick of being reminded of the beaches he missed. Instead of waves, however, colors glowed out from everyone like they turned radioactive. Billy had seen these colors before.

Bayani glowed his signature Malibu blue. Erica was a soft, fuzzy care-bear lavender. The Chief, predictably, was a dark, moody midnight blue. Vivian glowed the same color as Prince's Purple Rain album. Cabbage could have been wearing a Utah Jazz jersey he glowed so green. Jane stood out, her aura like ice, just a hair blue.

Bayani smirked and that's when Billy really looked down at his aura. His own aura glowed much fainter and weaker than the rest of the other Misfits but there it was...

YEP. Still David goddamn Bowie PINK.

"This is what you see normally, right? You got Synesthesia; I researched all sorts of things when our friend Will got possessed by the Mind Flayer." Cabbage yammered on, but, per usual Billy had tuned him out. Instead he squatted low next to Steve, across from Cabbage.

He didn't catch what Vivan whispered to Cabbage, but it sounded like a scolding.

Steve's aura was supposed to be gold. That warm, shimmering honey that saved him.

But it WASN'T.

His gold aura had been almost completely snuffed out with a crawling, grey and black sickness. It almost looked like his aura was rotting away. On his left arm, where he had gotten bit, it was darkest and even shown a bit dark red.

Billy didn't even realize that he had started to try to brush the noxious black away until Bayani gave him a somber look.

"Just like what happened with the trees." Chief spoke up, his voice a dark blue ribbon, and Billy didn't really get what he was getting at. Billy racked his brain to see if he could remember anything about trees...wait...his research about the chemicals. Those pumpkins were all rotted.

Was the Bulgasari causing Steve to rot?

"I've seen a fleeting image of a rotted tree. His aura has been corrupted, like a rot...like...blight." Bayani's words came out as a wash of hues of blues. If this is what Bayani always saw, then yeah maybe him rear-ending that ice cream truck made a little more sense.

"Blight....OF COURSE BLIGHT! I should've known. Good call bringing this guy here, El!" Cabbage all but shouted, his words burbled out around him like around green bubbles. He got out his notebook and scribbled something

Bayani turned his attention towards Cabbage slowly, listening.

"Blight's a powerful Dungeons and Dragons spell too. It does necrotic and darkening damage, which means it drains vitality from its target over time. See here, Steve's arm? He probably contracted Blight when he got bit. There are four stages of blight: affliction, deterioration, unconsciousness then...well then you gotta reroll a new character. This didn't start because Steve protected Billy from that attack, this has been festering for a while and now just got THIS bad." Cabbage's babblings ebbed out now like a free flow of green ripples as he showed Bayani something in his notebook. Billy narrowed his eyes. That dumb geeky game they played unfortunately sounded like... *exactly* what Steve was going through.

Maybe this whole game wasn't so *fantasy* as he thought.

"We must disinfect the blight on his aura. Nicely researched." Bayani's words came out as blue puffs of smoke, mingling with the green and turning a soft aqua. Billy wrinkled his nose, he didn't expect Cabbage and Bayani to get so *buddy-buddy*.

Ordinarily, he might be a bit jealous, well OK he was. BUT, he could *SHELVE* it because if this is what it took to save Steve, he would

throw them both a damn fiesta.

"Thanks, there's a good reason I'm the primary note taker for my party. But... you can't disinfect Blight. In D&D you just rest to get rid of Blight, but it's too late for that." Dustin explained and Billy at this point got impatient.

"Great deduction, geek, let's keep droning on about how you keep thinking this is some GAME." Billy bit out, exasperated, his words a greyish pink. Billy HATED feeling helpless.

"Steve's life isn't a GAME to me! He's my brother, you're the trash who treats everything like a game, so shove off!" Cabbage got heated like he wanted to pop shit and Billy fought the urge to shove him for telling him to shove off.

And did he DARE imply he thought this was all a damn game?! Billy rocked up to his balls of feet, tonguing out his bottom lip, fighting to rein in his wrath.

"Hey, cool it *both* of you, focus your egos on solving this Blight. Those farmers said the Blight was unlike anything they've seen before. They told me they couldn't even turn their crops around with baking soda. They had to pay a fortune for colloidal silver, and I never heard the end of it. Can a person even *get* Blight?" The Chief stepped up, rubbing a hand down his face. It was weird that the Chief wasn't going only after him, but Cabbage too.

"They can't. Whatever sickness Steven has, Chief Hopper, it's not something that makes any medical sense. Fungal infections don't cause hypothermia. This is something beyond my rudimentary knowledge of medicine." Vivian bounced Erica a bit, eyes hard.

"It's not corporeal, it's ethereal." Bayani whispered and a light went off in Cabbage's mind as he scribbled something else down.

"Dustin, you were bit and Erica healed you, but you're not Blighted. Loga, you're the same." Sideways pointed out.

"In D&D, Bards, like Erica, can't heal Blight. It had to be something else that helped me not get Blighted." Dustin flipped through his

book.

'Snick' like a lighter it all clicked, he had forgotten what he thought from the beginning about the Bulgasari. He was the Kingpin!

"Intent." Billy admitted darkly. "The Bulgasari has made it clear it wants Erica and I alive, and in particular, Steve *dead*. He's focused on him, keeps putting out hits." Billy looked Bayani dead in his eyes and recognition hardened Bayani. "Na parang napatay Russians Jerry at Maya (just like the Russians killed Jerry and Maya)." Billy said the rest in Tagalog and Bayani grimaced slightly in recognition.

"...Ugh, I can't believe I'm about to agree with *you* for all the wrong reasons, but I AM. Blight is a 4th level spell, most monsters can't cast it a lot. They have to save it for when it *counts*, and on players they really want dead. He really wants to kill Steve if the Mind Flayer did this." Cabbage trailed off, curling his hands into fists.

"Why Steve?" Jane asked, curious.

"Steve Harrington is the golden dragon of legend. Herring, like the fish." Bayani said as if that was fucking obvious.

"Oh god, not more of that Chinese nonsense again. We heard enough from your brainiac friend." Chief facepalmed, muttering to himself.

Wait.

"Mei TOLD you all about the story of the koi and the dragon?" Billy asked, coming to the realization that the only reason Mei didn't rip Steve apart was that she thought Steve was the fish in her favorite myth. She must have been REAL stoned.

"Chief Hopper, other peoples' culture is *not* nonsense. You've seen Steven transform, he has SCALES. Billy's sister was right about that boy." Vivian corrected like a whip, she really had it out for Chief. Maybe they got into it when he wasn't paying attention, or maybe the Sheriff was just bad with women.

"Oh my god! I got it. Steve's not our Paladin, he's Protanther, the gold dragon in Dungeons and Dragons! He's the King of Justice that vows to fight evil." Cabbage babbled, but Billy just focused more on Steve.

Bit by bit his aura seemed to be losing the fight against the Blight.

"Well, that's just great, how does this help him?" Billy snapped.

"I don't deal with mythology, Remove Curse might work, but I can't spell cast in real life. I don't have any special powers. I can't help Steve..." Cabbage's voice faltered and strangely, something in Billy gave way. Cabbage was really just worried about Steve the same way he was he worried about Bayani. He should really just *lay off*, same team.

"You don't need special powers to help. What you already have, is all you need" Bayani reached out to Cabbage to steady him and Bayani's aura seeped into Cabbage's turning it a jungle green.

"Whoa...that feels...weird." Cabbage reached out with his hand to the new color their auras made.

"Your specific aura, Dustin, is exactly what your Kuya needs." Bayani reassured as their auras merged.

"Green...like healthy plants, ones have not been contracted with Blight?" Chief asked, but Billy figured he didn't really want an answer.

"Photosynthesis?" The gears turned in Vivian's brain as well.

"You want me to cast Remove Curse, with my aura because it's *green*. Treat Blight like a curse in D&D and botany?" Cabbage perked up and Billy found himself feeling two things at once. One hope and validation, Bayani could and is helping Steve. The other, was *jealousy*.

He was kicking himself for it sure. He KNEW it was WRONG, but he wanted to be the one to help Steve, to be the one to repay him.

"Only *your* aura is the right color." Bayani nodded and guided Cabbage's hands by his shoulders over Steve's infected arm.

But, fuck his FEELINGS, fuck his ISSUES. His stupid egocentric hard-on for Steve was IRRESPONSIBLE and DANGEROUS and RECKLESS. Steve deserved better.

"Remove Curse!" Cabbage shouted with his hands splayed and his green aura began to ebb and flow out of his palms in steady pulses. Billy guessed this was the same way that the Bulgasari infected Steve.

Everyone froze, silent like the grave. Just like if they dared breathe wrong they'd fuck the whole thing up.

Please work...please work...PLEASE.

Vibrant green aura flooded into the murky, black infection, absorbing the darkness and reversing the flow. The darkness needled out, clawing to escape, but this was THEIR domain. The Bulgasari would be dominated here, even if it wasn't by HIM.

Slowly, the darkness receded and faded out, the green corralled it back to the original wound. They were almost out of the woods. Steve would be fine. He'd flash his smile, flip him off, and get those sexy scales back. Then, they'd go back and kick the teeth through the anus of the Bulgasari.

Bayani's expression furrowed. Worried. Billy concentrated to figure out *why*.

The darkness had been corralled into Steve's bite, but Cabbage's green aura had stopped advancing. It froze up like Tommy Harris at the key during a free throw stance.

"It's stalled...Hey, Bayani it stopped, I can't push past it to heal his arm. If I can't get rid all of it...it will...it will just grow back! What do I do?!" Cabbage blabbered and panicked. Billy rubbed his sweaty palms on his jeans and looked up to Bayani.

"The game you and Mike play, Hawkins, and Billy your myths, they're connected...they come together, as one." Jane began to put the puzzle together and yeah, but what the fuck did that mean? Mei just said he turned into a dragon!

Billy looked up to Baya, his purple Mardi-Gras beads dangled from his neck.

He hadn't put his own back on.

"Chief Hopper, you said they used Colloidal *silver* to get rid of the Blight on the crops right? Billy, your..." Vivian didn't have to finish the sentence. She meant his Maman's silver St Michael's pendant, the Patron Saint of Warriors.

It really did all come together, that dumb fantasy game, real life, and the myths.

The Bulgasari *did* rip it off Steve like it burned him! That was when Steve really took a turn for the worse. He didn't actually think his pendant WORKED.

Billy Loga was a goddamn shǎ bī (stupid cunt).

He dug into his pants pocket, carefully pushing aside the baggie of blow he hadn't gotten to yet, and pulled out the silver chain. It wasn't silver anymore because it had absorbed his own aura. It glowed a vibrant hot pink.

He caught Bayani's rare and genuine surprise. So, he *hadn't* seen him put this on Steve.

"Alright St Michael, time to go hard in the paint. Il vous protégera (this will protect you)." Billy, for the second time, looped the thin chain around Steve's head. Only this time he had to grab the back of his head to push it up off the watery floor, and instead of Steve's gaze heartedly burning him, everyone else's itched the back of his skull like flies.

Por armor del Dios (for fucks sake) Loga, be worth *something*.

The instant Billy let the pendant drop to the center of Steve's chest, a ripple of coral shocked out from the pendant and the dampened golden aura, flushed to life. The golden aura pulsed bright just like when it protected him against the Bulgasari when that fucker tried to steal his soul. Along with that shimmering rush, and Cabbage's green aura, the dark invasive aura disintegrated like it never had a fucking chance in the first place.

"STEVE! Can you hear me? It's Dustin! You're going to be OK!" Billy rocked back and let Dustin and Jane crowd Steve's space as color

finally returned to his skin.

All the sudden a wash of awkwardness hit him like a summer swell. He didn't fit in.

He didn't *belong*.

They all clamored around Steve like rubberneckers at a car crash, and Billy evacuated the space.

He just remembered he had warn Bayani, who had also gotten up. Billy didn't know what to do with his hands, they itched for a cigarette. He didn't have time to dig one out as Bayani got deep into his space.

"Loga, nag-aalala ako sa iyo. Ang iyong aura ay mahina, pinatuyo, halos maubos (Loga, I'm worried about you. Your aura is weak, drained, almost depleted)." Bayani didn't skirt any issues, that was for damn sure.

"Walang tae, ako ay nasa impyerno (No shit. I'm in HELL)!" Billy bit out, defensive. He knew it was the wrong tone to take with Bayani and instantly regretted it. He tried again.

"Tignan mo, na babae doon ay nakunan ng mga siyentipiko. Ang mga ito ay sa Hawkins. Kailangan mo bumalik sa LA (Look, that girl over there was captured by *those* scientists. They're IN Hawkins. You need to go back to LA)." Billy chanced a change of subject, but the hard look in Bayani's eyes said he wasn't any of it.

"Alam ko ang aking mga panganib; Alam mo ba ang iyong mga panganib? Ikaw kaliwa atin, mo ba iwanan ang mga ito masyadong (I know my risks; do you know yours? You left us, are you going leave them too)?" Bayani's voice took a venomous edge, red lips in a tight frown.

"Hindi ako nabibilang sa kanila. Pero, siguro gusto ko (I don't *belong* with them, but maybe I want to)." Billy shocked himself by admitting that.

Did he really want to? Did it even matter if he *did*?

Bayani's left hand gripped Billy by the curls of his mullet, and forced his forehead to his.

"You belong where you wish to, don't deny yourself family." Bayani reassured in English, with their foreheads still pressed together, whipped his hand around to his back. The polished, balanced handle of his Garab knife found its way into Billy's hand.

"Hindi ko na kaya ito (I can't take this)." Billy choked out in Tagalog, immediately pushing it back, but Bayani held fast.

"You *will* take this, and you *will* use it to cut down your enemy." Bayani insisted, stepping away. And suddenly Billy had an insatiable urge to ask Bayani to take him with him. But Billy knew Bayani wouldn't even if he could.

And fight or flight instinct? he'd be betraying everything about him if he didn't take the knife and instead asked to leave.

FIGHT not flight.

"Kuya...thanks, I'll take good care of it." Billy unsheathed the wickedly curved blade of the Filipino traditional knife, admiring its craftsmanship, and sheathed it again.

"Anumang bagay para sa mga pamilya (Anything for family)." Bayani gestured pointedly with his chin to the circus behind him. "Mei was right about your second family...and *Steve*." Bayani mocked in English, picking up his heavy motorcycle jacket and shrugging it on, tugging the braid out.

Billy clicked his tongue. Steve sure did have a big fat mouth.

A big fat something *else* too.

"Labas kayo rito (Get outta here), Kuya. I got this... them." Billy corrected himself and *meant* it.

"Good. I'll back for my father's knife, runt. Oh, take this." Bayani flashed a winning smile and tossed over his Mardi-Gras beads. He caught it in his off hand, like hell he was gay enough to wear this.

Bayani pouted sternly. He huffed and put them on. OK, he maybe he was gay enough.

Bayani slipped back on his tacky heels. In an instant, he and the black room vanished like a mirage, and they back in Tonya's mother's bedroom.

Billy pushed the long sheath in the small of his back under his jeans, and turned around only to jump. He was face to face with Jane, her big eyes crawling over him.

"He left before I could ask him about his number, or thank him. Not fair." Jane's face scrunched like smelled a fart, or about throw a tantrum. Girls could be so *dramatic*.

"You don't need to thank him for Steve, but nothing is stopping you from just hitting schitzo redial." Billy retorted, mussing with her frizzy curls on pure instinct. She tilted her head, amused.

OK?

"I wanted to thank him for what he said to you. We're a family, Loga." Jane stared him down solid, and Billy's heart lightened like the soft fucker he was reforming into. He was about to deny it flat, when he zeroed in on who just stood up on his own free will.

Steve locked eyes with him, posed hot, strong, and everything Billy wanted press himself into. Billy let a heavy barbell of weight glide off his shoulders. Suddenly a warm solace and a deep fatigue settled over him. Steve could take the wheel for a bit, he needed to lay down.

"Hey, nice beads." Steve smiled sheepish. What a DORK. A dork he'd raze a frozen hell for.

"Steve! Billy's aura is Barbie PINK!" If he murdered Cabbage here, was it still in the Chief's jurisdiction?

Notes:

HELLO FRIENDS!

I LIVE STILL!

I'm gonna expound on my notes from this chapter later, but for now I'm just happy to be back. This chapter was another hard one to write. This fic probably has another four chapters left in it, and maybe an epilogue so thank you to all who have stuck with it so far!

Colloidal Silver can and does take care of Blight on plants. I am trying to keep everything as accurate as possible while having things come together. I really hope this is all making sense.

And yes, I have Dustin an integral part of this story, but no powers for him (yet?). I don't want this to get too out of control. In the next chapter, you'll have him helping devise a plan to beat our Bulgasari.

I hope you all liked my OC, Bayani. I really don't like including OCs that take the spotlight too much, but I do think he is more than just a convenient plot device. If the filipino was too much, its only because I wanted to keep it accurate when people spoke other languages. I also wanted them to have their own conversations because Billy can be pretty secretive.

And yes, Vivian Sinclair was being a bit harsh on Hop, you'll find out why later.

Anyway, please drop me a comment and let me know what you think!

-TL